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The Prairie Rock Garden

Donna Balzer
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The Old Testament's Book of Genesis reveals that God planted the first garden. In the 1600s, Abraham Cowley said that all a man needs before descending "to the grave" is "a small house and large garden." While gardening can be a hobby, passion, science, art, calling, or a frustration, people have been indulging in variations of it for thousands of years. The Prairie Rock Garden is a manual for and discussion of creating, nurturing, and succeeding in cold weather, prairie rock gardening.

The author, a Canadian horticulturist, gardening instructor, and also the author of Gardening for Goofs, encourages her rock gardening proteges in the first chapter to be themselves and to follow their hearts. She says, "Just like photocopies get worse with every copy of the last copy, a great garden can hardly ever be created by imitating a vision of nature interpreted by another gardener." Nevertheless, colorful photographs and illustrations underline the discussion and give the reader some ideas.

Balzer discusses in detail style, the basic elements of design, color, balance, plant choice, rock selection, rockery construction, soil recipes, planting theory, and year-round care. The gardener should consider formal versus casual treatments, and how to draw "the eye through the garden." Should the garden resemble a river bed, a rock slide, or a Japanese poem? How much space can one devote to a rockery—several acres or one small planter on the terrace?

The chapter on rock selection is short but sensible. Sandstone, for example, is inexpensive and relatively easy to find. It is generally available in flat slabs that can be carried in the car trunk. The disadvantage of sandstone is that over time it can weather and erode in irregular and unpredictable ways; and, if it contains free lime, it can make your garden uncomfortably alkaline, especially for the acid-loving evergreens.

More than sixty pages of plant descriptions will aid the reader/gardener in plant selection. Surprisingly, there are helpful pages devoted to plants one should specifically avoid in the rockery and why. Lists of contacts and a short glossary appear at the end of the book.

There are three separate, but possibly overlapping types of gardeners who will benefit from this comprehensive book: those who want to have a rock garden; those who are condemned to gardening on the flat and frequently dry prairie landscapes, known as the "steppe" in Europe and Asia and the "pampas" in South America; and those who battle the cold climates and short growing seasons of the extreme latitudes.

In the book's introduction, Balzer tells the anecdote of how horrified her farmer father was to learn she put rocks in her garden on purpose, "let alone buy them." The readers of this book will learn all the reasons why rock gardening is a fascinating endeavor and as simple or complex an art as one's imagination, wallet, or upper body strength allows.

CYNTHIA GRILLOT (December 16, 2000)

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