

Czech Rock Gardening

by Paul Spriggs

Throughout the relatively short history of western rock gardening, there have been global hotspots. In these places where the style has developed a momentum that pushes the movement forward, new ideas developed which helped to elevate the style to a form of high art. In the late 1800s, rock gardening was centered in communities within striking distance of the European mountains. Specifically, areas of southern Germany, Austria and The United Kingdom, principally in botanical gardens in cities such as Munich, Edinburgh (Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh) and London (Kew and Wisley), as well as university gardens and high elevation gardens found in the Alps themselves. Some of these, such as the Schachen Garten (Germany), and Lautaret (France) still exist to this very day.



Small plants work well within the scale of the crevice garden and with each other.

Rock gardening started to become the domain of the home gardener only after the release of Reginald Farrer's books such as *My Rock Garden* (1907), and his influential 2 volume tome *The English Rock Garden* (1919). It was still more than a decade later before the world's major rock garden clubs such as the English Alpine Garden Society (1929), the Scottish Rock Garden Club (1933), and the American Rock Garden Society (1934) were formed. One region, which until 1918 was merely a collection of kingdoms within the then Austria-Hungarian Empire, was showing early signs of greatness—the

region we now know as the Czech Republic. As one might expect, rock gardeners in the capital Prague were well connected to the empire's center in Vienna, which itself was an early hotspot of the style. Being situated at the eastern end of the Alps, the Viennese aristocracy, including



ruling Emperor Franz-Josef and the Habsburgs, were having rock gardens built at their palaces at Schoenberg and Belvedere. One important Czech connection was a man from Prague named Arnost Sylva-Tarouca, agriculture minister for the empire, and avid horticulturist. Sylva-Tarouca wrote highly influential books on the topic of rock gardening (in particular *Unsere freiland standen*, 1910) and established an impressive rock garden at his own palace on the outskirts of Prague at Pruhonice, now a Unesco World Heritage Site. This was an important influence



A happy, natural looking crevice garden.

Photo by Paul Spriggs

on what was to become decades later a powerhouse of European rock gardening. A multitude of factors came together for this to happen including culture, climate, and relatively easy access to both the Alps, and to their own Carpathian Mountains.

Despite the growing popularity of rock gardening in the region, the Prague Rock Garden Club was not formed until 1971, and by the 1980s, boasted a membership of over 1000! Despite political and language barriers under the communist regime, the Czechs were well connected to rock garden communities in western Europe, the UK and in North America. ARGS legend Lincoln Foster himself led a US delegation to the High Tatras as early as the 1960s, and Czech Rock gardeners were sponsored to come to the US for conferences. They were also regular contributors to the ARGS Bulletin through the Communist period, writing extensively about their plants and experiences regarding this artistic form of horticulture. The fall of the USSR in the late 1980s opened their world and allowed easy travel to new and relatively unexplored mountain regions of the former Soviet Union, as Russian was a common language in the ex-soviet areas such as the Caucasus, the Pamirs and the Tien Shan

Since that time, several English-speaking Czechs, notably Josef Halda, Vojtech Holubec and Zdenek Zvolanek have travelled extensively in North America in the name of spreading the word of the Czech influence, telling stories of their plant hunting adventures, and promoting their distinctive style of rock gardening that is getting everyone excited, the crevice garden. As is the case for garden clubs the world over, the internet has caused a decline in membership and the golden era of Czech rock gardening has passed, but the culture is still very strong there. In recent years, they have hosted 4 highly successful international conferences which have given the world a chance to visit gardens, shop at plant sales, and experience speakers that would otherwise not be accessible to westerners. The Czechs also have a reputation for seed collecting and offering these



seeds to international rock gardeners. Famed seed hunters such as the aforementioned Vojtech Holubec, Vladimir Stanek, and Mojmir Pavelka all offer online seed lists of some of the most sought-after alpines, which would otherwise be unavailable. A highlight of these conferences is the garden visits.

There are still many fine examples of well seasoned gardens all over the country, especially in the areas around Prague, where their influence is sure to rub off on anyone who visits them. The influence is so great in fact, that visitors always come away with new ideas that they import to their gardens at home. It's usually obvious when visiting rock gardeners outside of the



Photo by Ryan Keating

Angles of tilt, tipping the strata lend to more drama.

Czech Republic, if the owners have visited at some point, as one simply can't help but adopt the high degree of style and art experienced by those who are commonly referred to as "the Czech Masters" I have had the great privilege to have visited the Czech Republic 4 times to date. 3 of those 4 visits were for the conferences, and one was for photographing and researching our book, co-authored by Kenton Seth, called *'The Crevice Garden. How to make the perfect home for plants from rocky places.* On each one of these visits, I have visited not only the gardens of Prague and outskirts which were included as part of the conferences, but I also have spent many days travelling farther afield to visit gardens, with the help of my Czech friends who act as guides and interpreters, that are virtually never seen by western eyes. My presentation to the Piedmont chapter of NARGS aims to bring you along with me as I showcase these incredible private gardens which represent some of the finest examples of rock gardening the world has to offer.



Get Ready for the April 27th Plant Sale

🌿 Plant Delivery Date April 26 🌿

Hi all,

The days are getting longer again and I know we are anxiously awaiting spring. I am already enjoying the intoxicating fragrance of edgeworthia as I leave my front door. I am seeing some hellebore and camelia blossoms and spring bulbs poking up their green tips. It's great to be a Piedmont NC gardener.

As you explore your own gardens you may be seeing some spots where some iris or hostas need to be divided. Or maybe some seedling hellebores that need to be thinned out. What a great opportunity to pot some of those up and let them get settled in their pots before you bring them to our annual Piedmont NARGS plant sale at the JC Raulston Arboretum "Raulston Blooms" event.

Raulston Blooms will be April 27th this year. That means we will be accepting plants the Friday before... April 26th. You all have been great at making this arrangement work, and I expect you will be awesome again this year. So mark April 26th on your calendar. Make sure you can get to the arb in the afternoon or you have someone to bring your plants for you. This is our big fundraiser for the year. Last year we made over \$2,700. That was down a little from the year before, but still not bad. More plants would make it better.

That is a good segue to what we do with this money. Well... it helps us to provide excellent speakers and to support the causes we hold dear. You are certainly well aware of the wonderful speakers we have for our meetings, but you should also be proud of some of the other causes your chapter is supporting. Over the period of the past 4 years The NARGS Piedmont Chapter has donated over \$14,000 to various local horticultural organizations such as the JC Raulston Arboretum, The Juniper Level Botanic Garden Endowment, The Bobby Wilder Endowment, and the Montrose Foundation.

So, you should feel good about your organization's part in building a stronger horticultural presence in Piedmont North Carolina and you should be thinking about what plants you want to contribute to this year's plant sale.

Keep potting them up!
Jim Hollister,
Plant Sale Manager



Photo from 2022 Plant Sale



Lessons from My First Rock Garden

By Scott Zona, Hillsborough, NC

I have always wanted a rock garden. My childhood attempts in the deep, rock-free, silica sand were not ringing successes. My adult gardening experiences detoured through the tropical palms, orchids, and bromeliads of Miami, but the desire for a rock garden never left me. Having devoured many of the classic tomes on rock gardening like Reginald Farrer's *The English Rock Garden*, as well as more modern works, like H. Lincoln Foster's *Rock Gardening* and Joseph Tychonievich's *Rock Gardening*, I was primed and ready to make my first rock garden when my spouse and I moved to Hillsborough, in early 2019.

For starters, we had actual rocks on the property. Specifically, we had a rocky embankment, formed when the builder graded a flat terrace on which the house was constructed in 1962. The bank was strewn with boulders, some of which were one or two feet in diameter, with areas infilled with smaller cobbles. Although not ideal in terms of a naturalistic arrangement, the rocks are there, so I figured I might as well use them. The embankment is roughly L-shaped, with the short side on the south end facing south and the long side facing east. A large white oak shades the northern end. Thus, we have a light gradient from full sun on the south side to full shade in summer on the north end.

In March 2020, once I cleared the weeds from the site, I began planting. A few existing plants on the upper terrace were granted temporary stays, including a large rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*), a stand of

beebalm (*Monarda didyma*), and a large, ungainly rambler rose. I grew many plants from seeds, but I also acquired plants from friends, the Duke Gardens plant sales, and local nurseries. Now, four summers on, I can assess the rock garden with a critical eye. Here are some of the lessons I have learned along the way.



The sunny end of the rock garden in early May, 2022.

Some plants are too aggressive for the rock garden.

Two of my earliest plantings in the rock garden proved too aggressive, rapidly spreading into other plants. A groundcover raspberry, *Rubus rolfei*, sent trailing stems in every direction and had to be removed. It kept growing, even on the brush pile, which shows you how aggressive this species is. I



***Juniperus conferta* 'Blue Pacific' preparing to drop down and smother an unsuspecting *Scutellaria resinosa*.**

planted Blue Pacific juniper (*Juniperus conferta* 'Blue Pacific') on the top of the embankment with the expectation that it would cascade gracefully over the rocks. I discovered that it spreads rapidly and gracelessly in all directions. Right now, I keep it pruned, but I am filled with gardener's regret.

Scale is important. Some plants are too big for the scale of my rock garden. The large, existing rosemary, which

would be cherished elsewhere in our garden, will probably have to be eliminated. As it is, I prune

it a couple of times a year to keep the plant in check. Next to it is *Eryngium planum*, also a legacy plant. It has large green leaves, which are lovely as foliage, and in spring it sends up three-foot-tall stalks with heads of blue flowers (that smell like horse manure—but only if you get your nose close to them). The flower stalks are too tall for the rock garden. I now have this plant growing in a perennial border, so I'll probably replace the one in the rock garden with a dwarf cultivar of this species.



***Eryngium planum* and the overgrown rosemary are just too big for the rock garden.**

Plant for year-round interest. Some of my earliest plantings were of evergreens (junipers, dwarf conifers, *Hesperaloe*), and come February, I am very glad for those plants. The herbaceous perennials can pack a punch of color in spring, but by winter, they are a dying memory. There is



The rock garden in January 2024. It's one of the greenest spots in our garden.

much to be said in favor of steadfast dwarf conifers as anchors for the rock garden. I would even say that my rock garden needs more evergreens.

Don't be afraid of editing the rock garden.

I usually plant three plants (or more) of everything. Sometimes the multiple plantings are effective, sometimes not. Do not be afraid to take plants out. I'm learning not to become too attached to plants, even my "babies" raised



from seeds. I ruthlessly eliminate them if they do not live up to expectations. Every formerly occupied space is a place from something new. That Blue Pacific juniper's days are numbered.

Some plants die. I was never sentimental about garden plants, and those in the rock garden are no exception. Some plants burn bright for a brief time and then, for no apparent reason, curl up and die. *Arenaria montana* 'Blizzard' was one that I thought would be the perfect addition to the rock garden, but it lasted less than a year. I don't blame myself. I have learned to enjoy plants when they are looking great because it may be their last hurrah.

Like all gardens, my rock garden is a work in progress. Going forward, I shall continue to grow new plants from seeds and try them in the rock garden. My goal over the next couple of years is to bring in more winter interest. I would especially like to have plants with colorful berries. I wonder if Reginald has any recommendations.



***Arenaria montana* 'Blizzard' looked fabulous — for one spring.**

Cyndy Cromwell Receives Outstanding Service Award

On January 20, the Piedmont Chapter recognized Cyndy Cromwell for her contributions locally and nationally to NARGS. When asked, Cyndy said her proudest achievements include creating a website for Piedmont NARGS and...and, enabling digital payments – moving beyond checks! She has served as chair and treasurer of our Chapter, hosted tours of her garden, hosted guests, hosted a fern table workshop, helped organize natural area visits in the Piedmont, served as chair of the NARGS Award Committee and participated in NARGS Tours and Adventures programs, the most recent in Patagonia and Turkey.

Cyndy is also a Board member of NARGS, Southeast coordinator of the NARGS Traveling Speakers program and nominated for NARGS vice president in the upcoming 2024 May election. Cyndy is a consistent and gently relentless recruiter and advocate for NARGS. Thank you for all you've done and continue to do Cyndy.



**Save the Date — Mark your calendars!!
Saturday, April 13, 2024!!**

**Spring is coming!
Lasting Impressions' Open Garden, Art & Plant Sale.**

**Please join us on Saturday, April 13th
at 4904 Hermitage Dr., Raleigh,
9am—4pm, rain or shine.**

**Visit the spring garden, shop 15 local vendors, pottery, jewelry, metal garden art,
woodworking, glass and more. Plants locally grown, many natives, for sun and shade**

**Beth Jimenez & Amelia Lane, partners
*Lasting Impressions***



New Member: Shannon Currey

Please welcome new member Shannon and enjoy her responses to questions from Amelia Lane, past president.

Why did you join the Piedmont Chapter?

I know NARGS has engaging programs and is a group of fascinating people with a keen interest in plants. Joining locally will connect me to them and help me learn more. And I like supporting organizations like NARGS.



What is a favorite plant and why?

Love *Sanguinaria canadensis*. I'm a big fan of North American native plants, and this one is so distinctive and lovely. I like the story about it being spread by ants, but I also love the way it emerges in early spring, the way the foliage develops over the entire growing season, and the flowers are just gorgeous.

Do you have a woody or herbaceous plant preference?

I'm heavily involved with the Perennial Plant Association and have worked in the perennial plant industry for many years, so definitely a preference for herbaceous plants. That said, I'm eager to expand my woody plant knowledge.

Something people would be interested to know about you or your garden

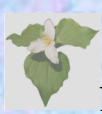
Horticulture is a second career for me. I started my work life as a social psychologist and then left that field to pursue horticulture. I still love the field I was trained in, but plants are where I've found a home.

What would you like to learn about rock gardening?

I'd like to have a better understanding of how rock gardening works in the Southeast and what plants, especially native species, will do well. I'm really interested in trying sand and gravel gardens.

Do you have a gardening challenge?

I garden in Durham where clay soils limit drainage, and where drought conditions make beds hard as a rock. Between that and significant humidity and disease pressure, I think rock/sand/crevice gardens are what I'd like to try.



**Piedmont NARGS Speakers/Events
Fall 2023/Winter 2024**

March 16, 2024

**Paul Spriggs (NARGS Traveling Speaker):
“A Grand Tour: Experiencing the
Rock Gardens of the Czech Republic”**

April 20, 2024

**Scott Zona: “Turning Rocks into a
Rock Garden”**

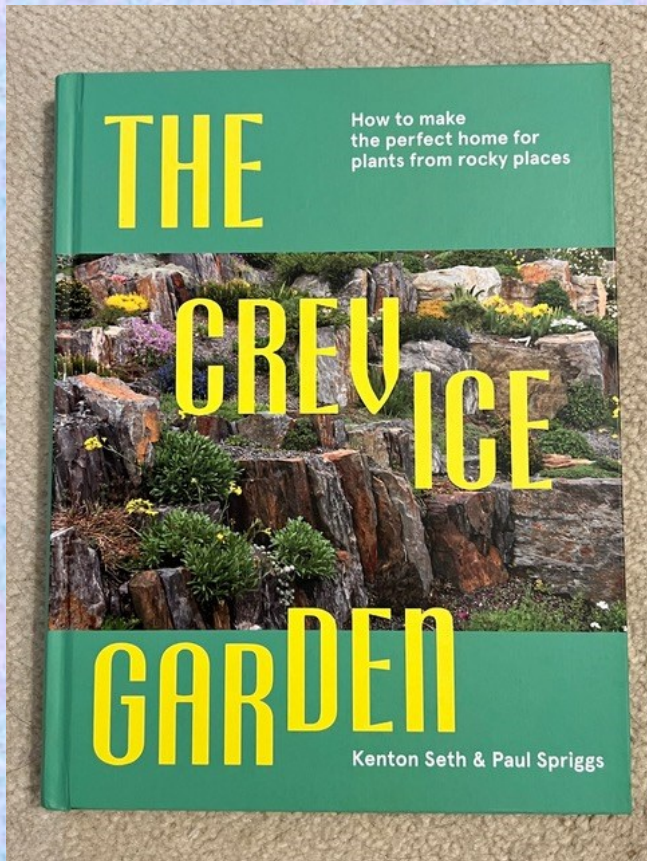
**Plus 15-minute talk by Cyndy Cromwell:
“NARGS Nova Scotia Annual Meeting,
June 2023”**

April 27, 2024

Raulston Blooms Plant Sale

May 4 Picnic:

Saturday, 11am-2pm (rain date, May 5)



Paul’s book will be available for sale and signing at the meeting.

Membership Form

Piedmont Chapter—NARGS

Membership year is from July 1 to June 30

Membership Options: Individual:\$15
Circle one. Household: \$20

Name: _____

Second person name: _____

Street _____

City: _____ **State:** _____ **Zip:** _____

Phone: _____ **Email:** _____

Make Check payable to: **Piedmont Chapter, NARGS**
Mail to : Cyndy Cromwell, PO Box 1242, Cary, NC 27512

Visit <https://www.piedmontnargs.org/> to learn more about the Piedmont Chapter

**May 4 Chapter Picnic and
Garden Tour**

Members plus a guest will be treated to a tour of Rudy Riggs and Jim Phillips garden at 830 Terry Road, Hurdle Mills, NC.

Lunch will be potluck, so bring your favorite picnic fare - and a chair. Drinks will be provided.

Rudy & Jim's property is 25 mostly wooded acres with about 2 acres of rustic gardens. Other features include a modest rock garden, woodland garden with a koi pond, access to the Flat River with a steeply sloped natural garden. They have gardened and collected plants for over 30 years. Please join as your schedule allows.



NARGS Piedmont Chapter Meeting

McSwain Center at the Raulston Arboretum

10:00 a.m.
March 16, 2024

Paul Spriggs

“A ‘Grand Tour’: Rock Gardens of the Czech Republic”

Goodies to Share

If your last name begins with a letter below, we encourage you to consider bringing a goodie to share.



Sept A-C	Feb M-P
Oct D-F	March R-S
Nov G-H	April T-Y
Jan J-L	May Picnic

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Message From the Chair

Sandy Harwood

Spring is definitely in the air and I hope you are finding yourself in the gardens - seeding, planting, cleaning, seeing, healing and being. Enjoy.

Bookmarks Available at the March Meeting



NARGS has produced plasticized, durable bookmarks to promote NARGS. The QR code on the bookmark links to the NARGS website and to a first-person story by board member, Mariel Tribby, and her introduction to rock gardening as a student at the Longwood Gardens training program and now a job at maintaining the rock garden at Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis.