

International Rock Gardener

ISSN 2053-7557

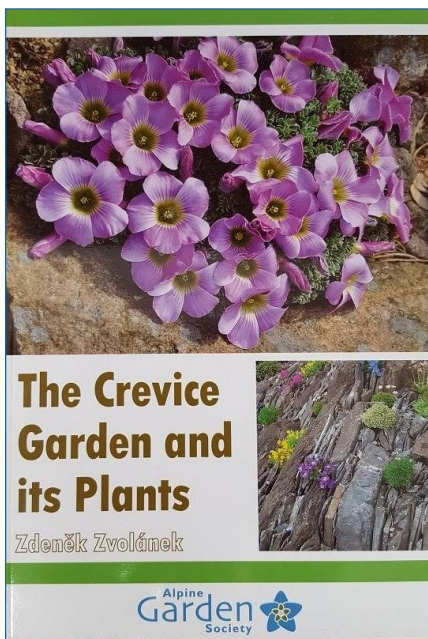


Number 201 The Scottish Rock Garden Club October 2026

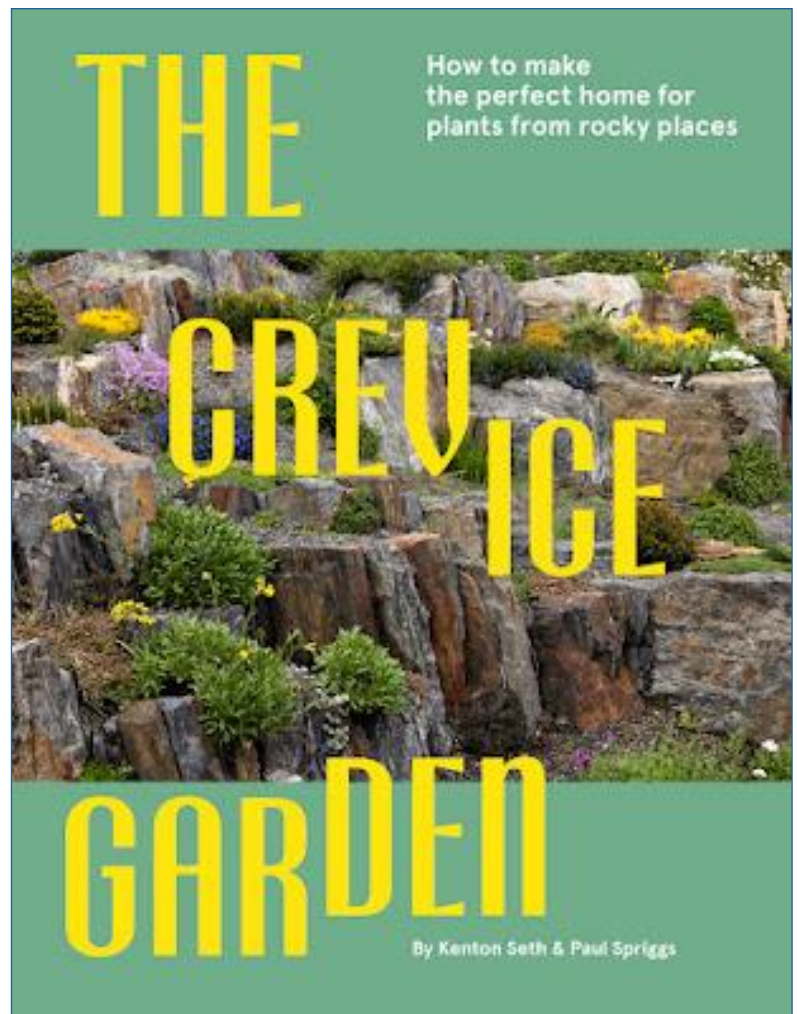


We are happy to repeat, with minor additions, the article by Drs Carole and Ian Bainbridge from The Rock Garden, Number 154. The original article, called A crevice Garden in the Yard, was printed in The Rock Garden, the twice-yearly printed journal of the Scottish Rock Garden Club, in January 2025.

Carole and Ian have been very busy in their own “new” garden in Southwest Scotland and have been involved with making crevice gardens in various venues and they were pleased to be able to welcome Students from Threave College on the second part of this build in their garden. As the Bainbridges point out, there are two worthy books on the subject of making a crevice garden – the old booklet by Zdeněk Zvolánek, one of the Czech pioneers of the technique, published by the AGS titled the Crevice Garden and its Plants. The second book, more recent and vital for anyone with an interest in crevice beds, is *The Crevice Garden* by Kenton Seth and Paul Spriggs (Timber Press) and cannot be recommended highly enough for its approach to building and planting such a bed.



Revised edition of Zdeněk Zvolánek's booklet from the Alpine Garden Society.



The Crevice Garden by Seth and Spriggs: ISBN-10 1739903900 ISBN-13 978-1739903909
Publisher Filbert Press
Publication date 21 April 2022.

Cover image: Drs Carole and Ian Bainbridge.

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--- Crevice Gardening ---

A Crevice Garden in the Yard - Ian and Carole Bainbridge

Since we moved to Galloway in 2010, we have been developing our 'new garden'. This involves a wide range of beds and garden types, from shrub and herbaceous beds to a stumpery and a scree. In the last few years we have taken to building crevice gardens, and this is the story of how we built one recently: the one we call the *Crevice in the Yard*.

The site is opposite the house and just below the alpine house. It is open, sunny, and is on a south-east facing slope. Originally this was a flat bed with a low wall on the south-east side, which we planted up with herbaceous plants for cutting. It rapidly became clear that this was quite wrong for the site, obscuring the alpine house, and so we decided to extend the rock garden across the length of this bed, which is a rectangle of about 5 m x 2 m. The stone from the wall was removed (largely for another crevice garden in the drive), which left us with about a 20° slope to the south-east, perfect for a new crevice garden.



Ian by the bed weeded and stones added, ready for the profiling.

Construction

A moderate amount of garden rubble and stones was added to the thin stony garden soil; this is always a good way to get rid of excess garden stones and debris. The first job was then to shape the bed. We didn't want it flat, and decided on forming two mounds of soil, with two gardeners' access walkways, one between the mounds and one between the western mound and the adjacent rock garden. The walkways run east-west and so are roughly at a 45° angle to the run of the bed. We built the mounds as high as we could, or

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dared, on the supposition that as the crevice garden is constructed, the mounds generally get lower as the rocks are manipulated into place.

Tracy:
adding
the bedding
sand.



Step two was to add coarse 'concreting sand' over the whole bed. Two tonnes were delivered into the yard, and barrowed across to the bed in the course of a morning. This formed a layer about 10 cm thick which was raked into shape — a tonne covers about 4 or 5 square metres. The sand forms a layer of really sharp drainage and it is far easier to set the crevice rocks into clean sand rather than rocky garden soil.



Next, the rocks. We were really lucky in that a local landowner gave us access into a small quarry that they use for farm track roadstone. The local rock is a Silurian greywacke, which fractures beautifully into bedding planes and, in exchange for a donation to the Ukraine Appeal, we went and selected three big trailer loads (about 2.5 – 3 tonnes), plus about half a tonne of rubble for the top dressing.

Carole: Rock selection and cleaning.

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Again, with moderate sized rocks, we estimate on the basis that a tonne of stone covers about 4 square metres. Also, it was interesting that as we built we often looked to split the biggest rocks before using them, and it was these rocks that required much extra effort to heave into the trailer. The job was made easier with help from Tracy, who gardens with us, and Gary, her husband, on the basis of cake bribery. With their help, we collected all the rock in a morning, and spread it on a tarpaulin in the driveway, a few metres away from the bed. The better the rock is spread out, the easier it is to select the perfect rock for your next placement.

So, the next step is putting the rocks into place. On this bed, we started at the left side, where the crevice was planned to merge into the existing rock garden. As we were building on a 20°-30° slope, we began at the bottom, sinking the bottom rock to rise neatly from the gravel path below. We regularly use a compass at this point, to ensure the rocks run east-west. This means the finished crevice will have planting pockets on the north and south sides of rocks; some sunny, some more shady and sheltered.



Flat rocks laid in for the gardeners' path.

We then choose rocks of similar thickness to line up above the bottom rock; each can be set touching the one below for added stability. Each is set firmly by digging in the sand to get the rock to the right level, then packing the sand around them, leaving about 6 to 10 cm of each stone standing proud of the sand; this will take the infill compost in due course. When the first row is completed, we start the second; rocks of a different thickness to the

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first row give a good effect, and we leave a gap between 15 and 50 mm for the infill between rows. Some of our rocks had natural waves in them; we tried to line them up aesthetically to give the effect of flowing strata up the bed.



“Wavy rocks”

We continued along the slope to the first pathway, then started on the next mound. With bigger mounds, it can be useful to set a row of ‘key rocks’ across the high point of the mound and then work away on both sides.

To complete the rock setting took three of us about three to four mornings, maybe thirty hours of work in total, but at least we ate the elephant a little bit at a time. For the two paths, we selected flat rocks that could be laid

horizontally in the bed, mixed with smaller thin rocks set vertically. Between them they give a solid surface for gardeners’ access but they are not intended as paths for all visitors!



Working with the flow of the stones.

The next stage is the compost infill. We save all our old alpine house and alpine bulb compost when we repot. It is very gritty, low in nutrients and free draining, and in our view makes the perfect infill for the crevice garden.

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Infilling is simple: pour a full bag of compost on the highest point of the crevice rocks, spread it out, brush it in with hands and brushes, and then tamp it down between each line of rocks with hands, fingers, trowels and – best of all – pieces of timber (75 x 38 mm or 50 x 25 mm are good). This compost needs to be firmed in really well, and it is a good idea to do this, add more compost, and do it again. The compost should fill to the point where it is about 10 mm below the final level you wish between the crevices; that 10 mm will be taken up by the top dressing. We needed about eight bags of compost, we guess about 100 kg.



Ready for the infill.

At this point, it is not a bad idea to walk away for a week or two, because it will settle, despite all your tamping efforts. Let the rain come, and see whether any infill needs topping up before planting. Our infill was quite a quick job, no more than a morning's work for three of us, plus a little follow-up time.

Planting

Some people call this the 'fun bit', but for us it's all fun. One important element of this is being prepared. Well before we start the crevice build, we're taking cuttings, choosing crevice-suitable seed from the Seed Exchange, and buying in choice little gems from the nurseries. We also saved a lot of 'spare' alpine bulbs when we were repotting in the alpine house, things like dwarf *Narcissus*, *Acis*, *Romulea*, *Brimeura* and *Cyclamen*. For a garden this size, we know that we will need hundreds of little plants, and that when they're all

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planted the garden will look completely empty! On the whole though, we'd say that it's not a good move to buy bigger plants for instant results; they're far harder to plant in the narrow crevices, and often they are the ones that struggle to establish — maybe their root ball is too developed? So planting the crevices is one occasion where buying smaller plants is a good thing.

If you have a bigger dwarf shrub or conifer to put into the bed, it makes sense to do this as you are setting in the rocks.



Plants set out in position.

When we started doing crevices, we thought we would plant a section at a time, but this doesn't work in reality. Every plant you pick up stimulates a thought of "*well this wants to go....*", so the *Ramonda serbica* goes in a shady corner, the *Onosma nana* goes right on the sunniest top point, the silver saxifrages want to be on the steeper slopes so the sprays of flowers can arch decoratively. So, we collect all the plants beside the bed, and start laying them into position. We generally keep going until they're all out, and then we layout the dwarf bulbs; these are usually in paper envelopes, and we have the view that they will fill in between the alpines. For this bed, we think we have used about 300 plants so far, plus about 30 envelopes of bulbs, and we're still regularly adding items. We also add some seed directly into the crevices, such as alpine poppies, but Carole is clear that this is best done in individual crevices, with a label, rather than simply being thrown at random across the entire bed. We have also planted some mat and flat species within the paths. We have no

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intention to keep these clear of plants and it's up to us to avoid treading on too many as we use our gardeners' access.



Tools for the job.

Planting tools? We have a wide range of thin and tiny trowels, spatulas, teaspoons, bits of bamboo cane and fingers to make the necessary holes in the infill material. It's always good to plant into moist compost – if it's very dry give it a quick hose down fifteen minutes before planting. Often, you can make a big enough hole just by

sticking in a small trowel and rocking it around; the infill will continue to settle. We generally aim to remove as much of the root ball compost as possible before planting; the exception might be our own plants which are in identical compost to the infill. This is especially important if plants are in very fibrous or peaty compost that might hold too much water. Breaking open the compost makes for much easier planting in crevices. Don't be afraid to compress the remaining roots of fibrous-rooted species such as saxifrages to enable you to get them in the crevices; but be much more careful with tuberous- or tap-rooted plants such as lewisias. In their case, smaller is definitely better; a big fleshy root is almost impossible to wedge into a crevice. If you have grown from seed, put several of the same species along the same or adjacent crevices; think how little groups of plants grow in the wild. The same applies to bulbs, a row along a single crevice can be very effective. Don't plant too deep at this stage, bearing in mind there will be a few millimetres of top dressing to follow the planting. However, keep some spare compost to hand for that little bit extra to settle the plants.

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Planting the bed.

Top Dressing

If you're going to do this properly, this is the slow bit. A key point is to acquire plenty of small fragments of the rock you used to build the garden, as this makes by far the best top dressing. We have made crevice gardens in the past that have been top dressed with gravels and grits that were different from the construction rock, and the reality is that they just don't match the rock and can look very odd. So, we brought back plenty of small rocks from the quarry, and boxes of fragments that we shovelled up when we were rock collecting. The first and arguably the most important job is to block the steepest gaps between the crevices. Some folk even put small plugs of clay in these to stop the compost washing down and out. Our method is usually to find a few thin slivers of rock, which we push into the compost parallel to the larger rocks, and then tap them all in together with a

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rubber mallet or a piece of wood. This fills even a vertical crevice effectively. Again, be sure that the compost is moist before you start work, or it may fly around loosely and not 'grip' the slivers. As the steepest sections are usually at the bottom, we work up each group of crevices, tapping in a few stones at a time. We arrange them carefully around all the plants, tucking them under the rosettes if appropriate. Where we know bulbs are planted, we use very thin slivers so as not to damage the bulbs below.



Rock sliver infilling with rubber mallet

On reaching the flatter sections, we sometimes move to simply spreading small random slivers (10-30 mm) in the crevices, more like a tiny scree.

This is much quicker and uses the smaller and shorter pieces of stone.

If you have material with mud, dust and silt, we suggest that you put it in a plastic crate and jet it with a power hose. This washes out the fines that might make a crust on the crevices.

For the yard crevice garden, we spent a fair bit of time with a lump hammer, breaking up small rocks into slivers suitable for tapping in; we then put all the left-over debris through a coarse sieve to retain the pieces between 5 and 10 mm because this very fine material is the best for top dressing between the flat stones on the paths.

As for timings, this all does take quite a period. We took several months over it, finding an hour or two here and there to do another section. Carole calls this occupational therapy ... especially if it's done for an hour or so in the evening with a glass of wine. The scree and path parts are far, far quicker and only take an hour or two. The good news is that we have found that even if the bed is not all top dressed, the heaviest rainfall does not cause much of the compost to wash out, so you can take your time to do this.



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The newly planted crevice bed after six months.

Plants

We're not going to put a long list of all the plants we've used, but we can give some generalisations. Saxifrages come high up the listing of good plants, kabschias and silvers both do well and even *S. pubescens* 'Snowcap' and *S. hypnoides* have settled in nicely. *Saxifraga oppositifolia* 'Theoden' was probably the first plant to flower in this crevice.

Edraianthus, notably *E. graminifolius* (right) and *E. pumilio*, look good. We've planted dwarf *Narcissus* such as *N. rupicola* and *N. albicans* and we'll wait to see how they fare. *Brimeura amethystina* 'Alba' is flowering as we write. Even though they are little mentioned in the crevice garden books, we think it's well worth trying more dwarf bulbs. *Cyclamen parviflorum* var. *subalpinum* has also flowered



and is settling in. *Calceolaria biflora* and its close relatives have settled well and are seeding around steadily, and creeping plants like *Thymus serpyllum* 'Elfin', *Cotula atrata* and *Antennaria dioica nana* are establishing in the pathways.

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Androsace carnea settling in and
Scutellaria hypericifolia.



The hairy androsaces suffered in the last wet winter, but *Androsace carnea* and *A. sempervivoides* are both getting going.

We like the dwarf *Scutellaria*; the two most reliable seem to be *S. alpina* and *S. hypericifolia*; *S. orientalis* and its hybrids are lovely but seem prone to dying in our wet winters. *Linaria aeruginea* has been a good surprise package and is already seeding gently. We'll keep trying different things; *Junellia micrantha* from Argentina is doing well, and *Myosotis rakiura* from Stewart Island in New Zealand has also survived two winters. *Ranunculus calandrinoides* did really well in our Edinburgh crevice garden, so we just need a small plant to put out here as well.

Of course, when all is done, you'll still want to be adding more plants to your crevice garden. Sow seed directly if that's appropriate: tap-rooted species such as alpine poppies are probably good to do this way. You'll also want to add more plants, and replace casualties, and to do this you must take the little extra time to remove the top dressing where the plant is going to be added, plant it as normal, and then put the top dressing back again. Any stray compost will soon wash away with a good watering to establish the plant.

More thoughts:

About two weeks after the main body of work was finished on the crevice garden, Carole said "*That bulb frame is in completely the wrong place, it means you can't see the crevice garden, it's going to have to go.*" And she was right, so the bulb frame was dismantled, and moved to a new home above the alpine house (at the expense of more veg. patch). This left a mound of about a ton of coarse sand, which sat there shouting 'crevice garden' to us every day, until it was back up to the quarry for another couple of tons of rock and off we went again.

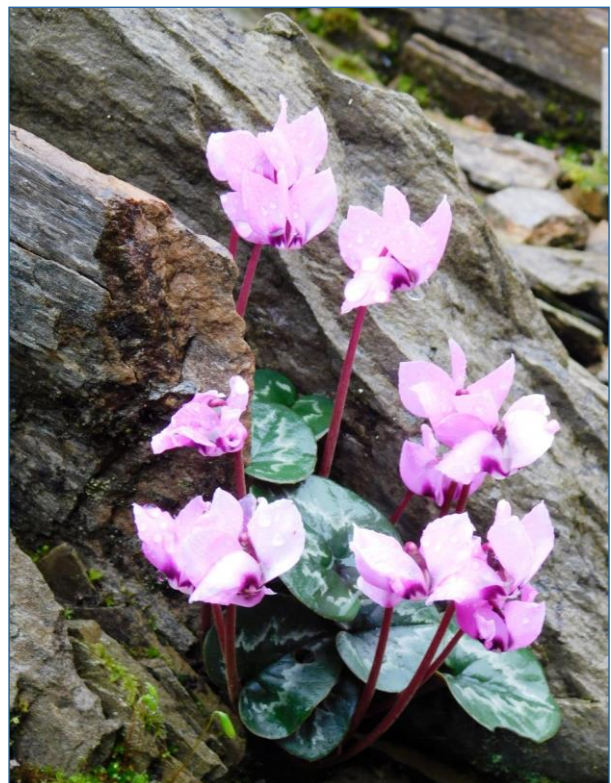
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The bulb frame already getting in the way during planting.

This new bed is an island bed, offset from the previous one, but worked to reflect the rock arrangements so they all fit together. The best bit of doing this bed is that we invited the horticulture students from the National Trust for Scotland's Threave School of Heritage Gardening to come to help with the build and learn about crevice gardening. It was really rewarding to see their enthusiasm; they refused to leave at the allotted time because they wanted to finish the job!

This bed is now all planted up, and top dressing has started, there will be many happy hours with small slivers and a rubber mallet over the coming summer. Meanwhile, the early flowers are getting going; *Cyclamen alpinum* and *coum* in the lower parts of the bed, kabschia saxifrages and *Iberis aurosica nana* in the sunny (?) spots; harbingers of spring and warmer brighter days.



Cyclamen coum in a crevice.

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How not to see a crevice garden in the snow.



Sand heap, left after dismantling bulb bed, shouting "I want to be a crevice garden."

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Bulb frame in its new home.



Threave students hard at work creating the crevice garden.

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Threave students at work.



Almost finished.

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....and planting up.



Iberis aurosica nana.

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And Finally....

When all is done, you can stand and admire your work and the plants as they establish and flower. We are often asked how much weeding we have to do, and always say “very little”. This may be because we look at the crevice plants most days, and when spotting a little



weed or some *Marchantia* liverwort we just lift it out. We probably have one tidying and weeding session every spring with scissors, tweezers and fingers, and maybe another autumn tidy as well, but we always say that there is far less weeding than in any average herbaceous bed. And if the neighbours catch you weeding with tweezers, it only reinforces their view that you are completely nuts!

Aquilegia laramiensis.



Originally described crevice bed after one year.

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Further reading?

There are two excellent books on crevice gardening: *The Crevice Garden and its Plants* by Zdenek Zvolanek, published by the AGS, is a really good little book, and *The Crevice Garden* by Kenton Seth and Paul Spriggs (Filbert Press) is a truly excellent guide to any aspiring crevice gardener. On Facebook, *Modern Crevice Gardens* is a useful group page full of ideas and examples of crevice handiwork across the world.



Finished apart from the top dressing.