



Spring splendor in a crevice garden at the Cheyenne Botanic Gardens. Photo by Isaiah Smith.

Create your own crevice garden

Have you ever wanted to bring the Rockies home to your backyard? Try creating a crevice garden! These landscape features can be designed to look like your beloved mountains and provide conditions ideal for a wonderful array of plant species.

What is a crevice garden?

It's not the same as a rock garden, which usually presents as a collection of rocks jumbled together with plants in between. In a crevice garden, the stones nestle against each other and puzzle-piece themselves together into miniature mountains. This creates small spaces with deep veins of gravelly soil in which plants adapted to rocky places thrive.

While there is some heavy lifting up front, crevice gardens are worth the effort, providing a kaleidoscope of colorful flowers throughout the growing season as well as interesting textures and foliage in winter. Alpine species tolerate much

colder temperatures than other garden plants and look great longer into the winter season. Many also wake up earlier because the stones hold more heat during cold nights, allowing the garden to begin growing earlier than you might expect.

Once established, crevice gardens are also easy to maintain. They don't need much fertilizer and many weeds can't survive in such an inhospitable environment. The weeds that do take hold are very easy to remove due to the gravelly soil.

Choose a location

Starting a crevice garden is easier than you might think. First, do some research and analysis. Choose a site that is easy to access both by foot and with equipment. Make sure you have a plan for transporting a truckload of stones from the quarry to your garden. You'll save a lot of heartache and, more importantly, backache by considering this ahead of time.

Next, consider sun exposure. Conditions on north slopes are much shadier than south slopes. By replicating a mountaintop, with notable differences in sun exposure over a short distance, you can create microhabitats for a wide variety of plants. Some need a bit of protection from the sun, while others can't stand the shade.

If you would like a little more shade on your mountain, situate your crevice garden so that either morning or afternoon sun is blocked by trees, shrubs, or other structures (such as your home). If you are more interested in plants that prefer full sun, as most alpine or mountaintop plants do, place your crevice garden on the south side of structures or masses of vegetation.

Build the foundation

Before having stones delivered, decide if you want to use equipment such as a skid steer to place the rocks. If you choose to do the work by hand, visit a local rock supplier



A winter view of the garden. Photo by Isaiah Smith.

and try moving some stones around. Only buy rocks of a size that you can comfortably lift.

Laying the foundation for your crevice garden is the most important step. By placing your stones in a deliberate way that emulates nature, you'll move beyond rock garden to crevice garden. While rock gardens showcase interesting rocks, crevice gardens focus on the small empty spaces between the rocks that hide and shelter little treasures.

When building the garden's foundation, it's best to set everything onto a berm or pile of soil. Dig out along the shape of the berm, throwing soil from the edges into a pile in the middle. This raises

the elevation of your garden so it looks more like a mountain and allows you to easily bury the stones you will use to create the garden. Starting with a berm of soil also ensures good drainage.

Starting with your largest stones, look for edges that are roughly parallel. Build off these larger stones to create crevices, laying stones in a way that mimics natural geological layers. Aim for small, narrow spaces between rocks and strive to make everything look as if it has always been there.

This takes time and careful analysis of the shape of each stone. Don't be disheartened if you spend an hour moving and repositioning

the same stone over and over again. As you lay more stones, deciding where to place them becomes easier.

Partially bury the stones to make them look more natural and to prevent the garden from shifting or moving as it settles. As you place rocks, only pack enough natural soil around them to keep them from moving. Later in the process, you'll add a specific soil mixture that's better suited to alpine species.

Mix your soil

Alpine plants have evolved to grow roots that exploit small pockets of soil between rocks. They'll naturally adapt to the crevices you



Note the linear placement of the rocks in this crevice garden at the Cheyenne Botanic Gardens. This linearity can be very prominent in a finished crevice bed or more subtle, once the bed is finished and plants are growing. Photo by Isaiah Smith.

create. The less space there is, the more the plant is forced to make that crevice its home and use its surroundings efficiently.

To create a thriving crevice garden, you must mix your own soil. There are two parameters to consider: 1) Organic matter in the soil should be little to none and 2) the smaller the particle size, the better. In one-third portions by volume, combine sand, crusher fines (or rock dust), and the smallest rock you can find. Mix everything well and begin burying your stones.

You will probably end up hiding a good portion of the feature this way, but don't worry. Enough of the stones will still be visible, and over time, the plants will obscure the stones anyway. It helps to bury each stone lightly, then wet the mix lightly with water, and repeat. The soil should settle so it won't wash out the first time it rains or is irrigated.

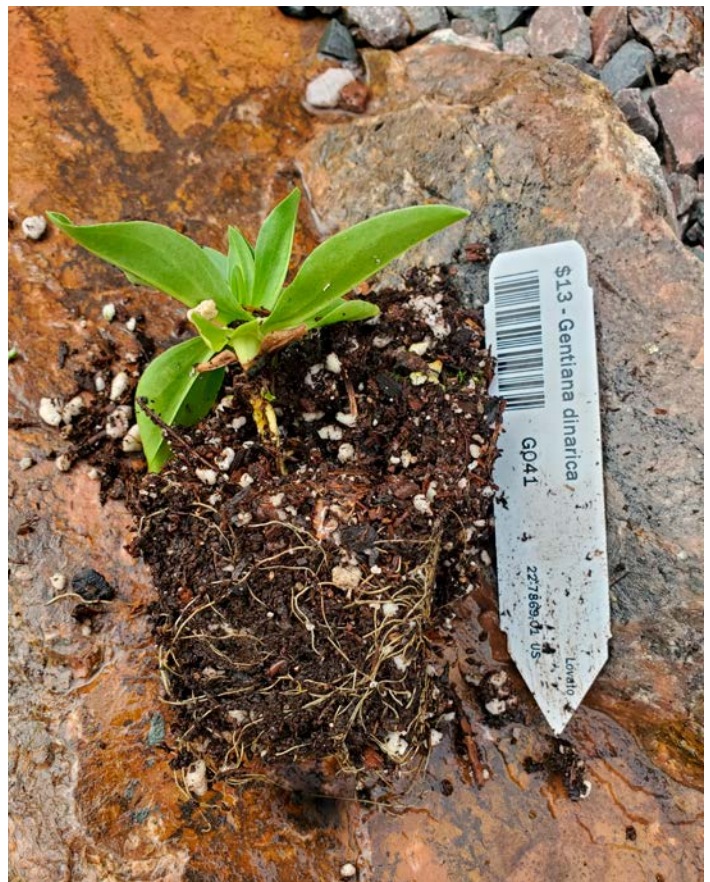
Next, add a top dressing of small rock that matches the large stones used to build the crevice garden. I use ½-inch and ¾-inch gravel mixed together, since it looks more natural than using gravel of only one size. Spread this evenly across all crevices and water again to settle.

Place your plants

Now it's time to install your plant treasures in their brand-new homes. First, remove all that beautiful, nutritious nursery soil from their roots. If you skip this step, the roots will never leave the confines of the nursery soil to grow into the gravelly mix you provided. They will wilt faster and eventually die outright. I bare-root my plants by gently dunking them in a bucket of water and working the soil out of the roots with my hands. Plant immediately before the exposed roots dry out.

That's it! You should now have your very own peak of the Rockies in your yard. Name it something majestic and enjoy it all year long. If you need some inspiration, come visit the Cheyenne Botanic Gardens. We love showing off our crevice garden and sharing our view of the peaks on the prairie. See you soon!

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The nursery soil clinging to this plant's roots was removed before planting. Photo by Isaiah Smith.



Once you've rinsed the nursery soil from the plant's roots, it should be planted immediately. Photo by Isaiah Smith.