

THE INDIAN ROCK GARDEN

I will start by putting a few facts about the English rock garden. It was “invented” about the end of the 1st century, when climbing in the Alps became popular among English mountaineers. Climbers brought back the small, jewel-like flowers they found growing among the rocks at the higher altitudes. And in order to establish them in their own gardens, they attempted to simulate them the conditions where the plant had originally been found. Hence rocks were procured, arranged and the Alpine plants carefully placed in the spaces between them.

From such early efforts the English rock garden has grown in beauty and sophistication until it has become, in the imagination of gardeners all over the world, the high water-mark in garden design. When we think of a rock garden, we see in our mind’s eye pictures of the rock gardens at Kew and other brilliant, glossy images of expertly designed and planted rock gardens, all in their peak form.

Obviously we try to emulate this with the material at hand, but seldom succeed in making anything really beautiful because we have not understood how difficult it is. We try to make do with whatever shape and size of

stones we can find and we arrange these as we can. We use whatever plants are hardy and common, for we feel that we need not waste too much time and labour on the rockery; it should be able to look after itself. Naturally, the Indian version of the rock garden has moved very far from the English ideal. It has become a steep little hillock, studded with stones and interspersed with spiky plants.

It is a hopeless business to attempt to reproduce something which has its origins in a climate and conditions which are so totally opposed to the climate and conditions of the Indian plains.. Why do we keep trying to do it? The answer perhaps is that we find that the texture of stone next to the texture of plant material is extremely beautiful, and we keep trying to capture that beauty. Well, in that case, we must do some thinking. We must use all the basic principles of the English Rock Garden and adapt it to suit our conditions.

The Bangalore terrain is naturally rocky, and often people building a new house will find boulders embedded in their land. Usually the owners think it necessary to dig them out, with labour and trouble, before they start to make a garden. And yet those boulders ought, in fact, to become the focal point around which the garden should be planted.

To have natural rock on your land can be as fortunate as having mature trees. We are too accustomed to think a lawn must be absolutely level and smooth. But a gently undulating area of grass, studded with natural outcrops of rock could look much more beautiful – and certainly much more interesting – than a smooth, green table-top. The beauty of any stone – brown, grey or black – is always enhanced by the proximity of even well-cut grass.

I use the words “natural stone” to distinguish it from rubble and quarried stone, which is often left over on sites after the construction is completed. One hates to waste all that material and the first idea is to pile it up and make a rock garden. This is a disaster; that rubble is good for building walls, paths or even pools, but is unsuitable for anything else. As long as you don’t need a very smooth path, rubble is excellent, especially if there is room between the joints for grass. If rubble is used for edging pools, then again this should be done in a plain and business-like way, without attempting to be coy or “artistic”.

PAVING

In India we dislike the word “paving” because it nearly always means a flat piece of cement concrete. That is not what we mean when we talk of paving in the context of garden design, especially in Bangalore, the home of good granite. Indeed, the local granite is so attractive that one is often tempted to use too much of it – for paving, for pillars and pergolas, for fencing and even for garden furniture.

There are, ofcourse, several other kinds of paving materials – brick, gravel, smooth, rounded pebbles, and last and worst, tar macadam. Today, however, we are interested only in stone paving – and that too, in a small area near the house which will be called a courtyard.

You can either choose square or rectangular slabs, or uneven-shaped “left-over” slabs, which will probably be cheaper. But, whichever it is, you must make sure to have large open joints. It is in these joints that your “garden” has to be planted. Most of your plants will be ground-hugging ones, most of them with the small purplish-grey leaves belonging to the tradescantia tribe. Obviously all those spaces which are heavily trod upon, must have only grass between the joints; but off the beaten track, as it were, it is surprising how much biomass can be produced even in a two-inch space

between stones. The stones probably help to conserve moisture in the soil, and even make our task of watering easier.

Depending on the amount of sunlight available, you might even be able to have flowers like perennial balsam, verbena and some kinds of begonia. Shady corners can be well-furnished with ferns and grasses –there must be wider gap in the paving to accomodate them, so that it is important to plan the planting and the paving at the same time – although ofcourse, you can always dig up a slab later on if you have what seems a better idea.

Since paving has rather hard and hot surfaces, we need to find ways of softening and cooling it. Water, and especially flowing or dripping water , is the most efficient cooler. Can we arrange a fountain in our courtyard? It seems unlikely, the water situation being what it is. So we must find the kind of greenery which will be both cooling as well as softening. We need plants with the minimum stem and the maximum leaf – in other words, things like philodendrons, monstera, money plants and palms. A north-facing wall can even be covered with Indian ivy, which can be guaranteed to reduce the starkness of any man-made structure.

A paved space which is overhung by tall buildings is naturally more difficult to manage than one which gets more sun and light; for different

reasons the danger in both cases is that it may become claustrophobic – whether because it feels as if it were at the bottom of a well, or the greenery itself becomes oppressively cluttered. This can easily happen when, in addition to the plants, we use other “beautification” items indiscriminately. Things like pots, pieces of sculpture, rocks, bird baths, if you want them, must be chosen and placed with the greatest care. A single good piece, correctly placed will add more to your garden than half-a-dozen ill-assorted decorative items.