

A GARDEN OF MOMENTS

Anne Vale's rock garden in Black Diamond
offers "tiny little tasty bites of beauty"

Story by Donna Balzer ∞ Photos by David Ballantyne

"I don't plan to water," claims Anne Vale as we look at the emerging rock garden in front of her new home. "I just dumped loam on as is—no compost or gravel."

Vale, well known for her specialty greenhouse in Black Diamond, can afford to be so casual. With almost 40 years experience gardening in Alberta, she doesn't have to do anything conventional anymore. She came from England in 1960 as a 30-year-old planning to attend a wedding; she fell in love with the landscape and came back again in 1961, deciding she wanted to stay. By 1967 she had bought her current place in Black Diamond and started farming. If there is a plant worth trying, Vale has probably tried it. If there is a garden style catching people's interest, either she or her staff probably know about it or have tried it.

TOP LEFT: Ground covers such as thyme hug the space between the rocks. TOP RIGHT: Dianthus—commonly called "Pinks"—often form tight little buns of growth in a rock garden. BOTTOM RIGHT: Sedum is a hardy, drought-tolerant perennial for the sunny rock garden. BOTTOM LEFT: Penstemon albertinus doesn't have a common name, but it does have a great icy-blue colour and compact form.



DONNA BALZER



In her own yard, Anne decided to go with tough and hardy alpine and rock garden plants—the things she so often sees in the nearby Rocky Mountains.

“A rock garden is best described as a garden of moments—tiny little tasty bites of beauty waiting to be admired. You really have to get down on your hands and knees to appreciate a rock garden,” emphasizes Vale as she looks at her pile of rock while I imagine its future beauty and—somehow, implicitly without discussion—understand she has chosen the best garden style for her lifestyle. She is busy in and out of the nursery even though those of us looking at her from afar assumed she had retired at least a few years ago.

“Oh no, I’ve never actually officially retired—I’m just doing less. I order the seed and labels; I’m taking care of the accounts and I’m growing the perennials.” According to Vale, the majority of the work at Vale’s Greenhouse is done by greenhouse manager Katrina Diebel, who looks after the day-to-day staffing and operations in the greenhouse, designs new planter combinations and grows the

annual flower crop.

Vale is busy as usual even as she shows off highlights of her existing rock garden and the progress on her new home landscape. The greenhouse grounds rockery was new last time I visited and has knit nicely with the rest of the gardens surrounding her former home and current office.

“My garden is more like a zoo than a garden—really—but happy accidents do happen,” says Vale referring to the wild and varied collection of plants throughout her nursery’s garden. She is constantly testing plants to see what grows in her harsh climate and, fortunately for the people in her community and Calgary to the north, she is always passing along her wealth of knowledge. Her energy is motivational for even the newest gardener—who should be reassured knowing that even the experienced are still learning. One of the special moments in her existing rock garden includes a combination of perennial fleabane (*Erigeron leiomerus*), perennial alyssum (*Alyssum montanum* cv.), candytuft (*Iberis* ‘Little Gem’) and a delicate pink primula (*Primula corti-*



FACING PAGE: The first rock garden at Anne Vale's was built on poor, sandy, gravelly soil. TOP: Partridge feather and Sedum "Bronze Carpet" contribute summer-long colourful foliage. BOTTOM LEFT: Space is not an issue if gardeners take inspiration from Vale's alpine trough gardens. BOTTOM RIGHT: Euphorbia myrsinites has great texture but is listed as a zone 6 plant and may be short-lived in Alberta.



soides). In this one little pocket, mauve, yellow, white and bright pink all bloom in sync during mid-June when spring is fully in force in this part of the province and this area of the garden.

Vale is convinced that a display garden associated with a nursery is the best of both worlds for a small plant business person trying to convince buyers to go beyond petunias and into the world of *Dracocephalum* and *Tanacetum*, especially if the nursery location isn't in an easy-growing part of the province.

While the largest number of frost-free days per year in Alberta is found in the protected low elevation climate of Edmonton (140 days) and the smallest number of frost-free days is found in the mountain town of Coleman (zero days), Black Diamond growers are accustomed to a short, if not the shortest, season of their own. With frequently frosty evenings the norm, Vale was hoping for 60 frost-free days in the 1999 growing season but by August 27 had only had 31 days since the last dusting of white on the roofs (July 26, 1999). Southern Alberta gardeners know even the winters aren't as mild for plants as gar-

dens in northern or central Alberta. Without a consistent snow cover to protect tender and delicate crowns and evergreen foliage, the Chinook region's winds harshly evaporate moisture and sometimes wick water right out of the plants themselves.

Not deterred by the cold climate, Anne sought out all "the dry stuff you find in nature" when she built her first rock garden on the greenhouse grounds several years ago. "This was poor soil, really—poor sandy, gravelly soil—and shallow. People had been dumping ashes here," comments Vale, explaining how she had used trial and error initially to decide what to plant. "A lot of things died that we expected to live and other stuff lived," marvels Vale as we admire her wiry, twisted, weeping white pine (*Pinus strobus pendulus*) near her Rosy O'Grady clematis on the fence. Northern Bedstraw (*Gallium boreale*) was one of Vale's first successes and it still thrives, even though the gardens do not get special winter protection. To deter deer "we have a large dog," and a few years ago Anne placed loose chicken wire over the rockery when the deer numbers in town were high, but she

never employs straw or any other fall protection to artificially help plants through winter.

During construction of the first rock garden, Vale placed the largest rocks with a bobcat and then set the “two man” (very large but manageable) rocks in place. She then dumped four inches of pea gravel on top of the loam on the site. Finally, she added the smaller rocks and planted the drought-loving galliums, sedums, achilleas and tanacetums she felt would tolerate the dry conditions. One plant, a native, with small, icy-blue blossoms catches my eye immediately. *Penstemon albertinus*, at only 10 cm tall with upright flower stalks and glossy green foliage, is a marvel of natural beauty—although unfortunately unavailable in Vale’s nursery.

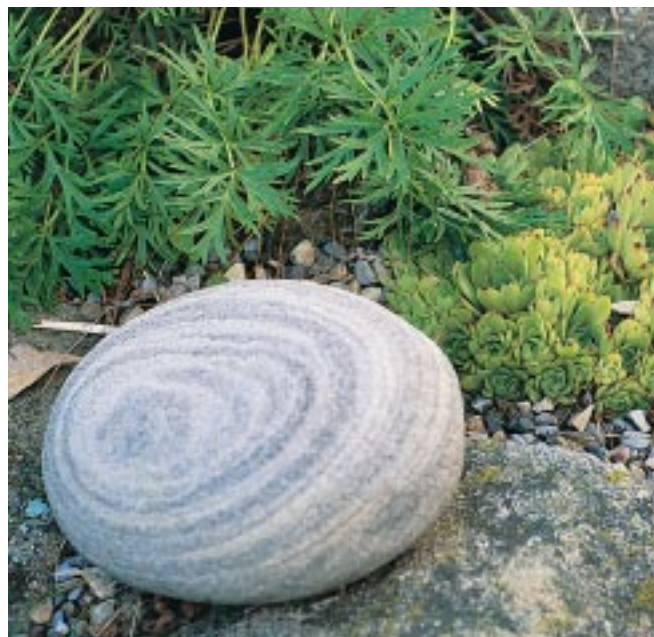
Vale is not intimidated by plants from seemingly warmer climates and does not limit her garden to Rocky Mountain natives. In a zone 5 Denver garden she first saw Partridge feather (*Tanacetum densum*), a wonderful, silvery-leafed member of the daisy family. In her rockery she uses it with a clump of red sedum (*Sedum* ‘Bronze Carpet’). “*Tanacetum* is as tough as a boot but it needs it dry,” comments Vale, who seems to love finding a hardy drought-loving plant and tours gardens in her own and other regions constantly to find new design inspiration.

And so, although the business rock garden is maturing nicely, Vale is busy building another rockery in her own home landscape, illustrating that her goal of not watering is a convenience and conservation effort, not a lack of energy. In fact, Vale doesn’t seem to have made much concession to the aging or retirement process. “There must be at least a million weed seeds in every cubic inch of soil (in the new garden)—I’ve weeded four times already,” says Vale as we discuss her new rockery built with soil full of farm weeds. “I might add gravel later as a mulch, but I want to make sure the slope is stable first and the weeds are under control.”

These words, spoken by Anne Vale, could have come from any true gardener—of any age, in any era, at any location. Getting the weeds under control is surely the first step every gardener takes, although impulse shopping may be a close second if the timing is right.

NOTE: The rock garden is just one tiny portion of the display gardens carefully tended at Vale’s Greenhouse Ltd. in the town of Black Diamond. The rock garden is open to the public every day during normal business hours, while the rest of the grounds are open Saturdays only during June, July and August. Call (403) 933-4814 for further information.

Donna Balzer is a garden consultant and writer/broadcaster in Calgary. Her latest book is *The Prairie Rock Garden* (Red Deer Press).



ANNE’S FAVOURITE ROCKERY PLANTS

“I don’t allow myself to have favourite plants—except roses of course—most of which we can’t grow here,” says Anne when asked if she would share the names of her plant favourites. After I rephrase the question, Anne agrees it would be good to share the plants she likes well enough to find a spot for in her new garden. In no particular order, and not strictly for the rockery, here are some of the plants she likes “well enough to use in her new yard”:

Lupinus cvs.—local strain of lupines in the area at least 100 years

Dracocephalum grandiflorum—blue-flowered member of the mint family

Gentiana paradoxa ‘Blue Herald’—this gentian survived the harsh winter of 1998-99

Sedum ‘Bronze Carpet’—dark purple foliage

Geranium dalmaticum—soft pink flowers on a mounding plant

Pulsatilla vulgaris cvs.—several good spring-blooming, crocus-like plants

Tanacetum densum—Partridge feather has fine-textured foliage and silvery leaves

Achillea serbica—small white flowers on this hardy groundcover

Saxifraga dolomitica—hardy evergreen saxifrage

Papaver albo-roseum—arctic poppy with delightful delicate flowers

Dianthus pavonius—one of the many excellent dwarf pinks