

GOT ROCKS?

by Frederick B. Essig

For most Floridians, rocks are as alien as snow...unless you count sand, which is really tiny rocks. My kids were thrilled and entranced with the big, round, hard things they found to climb on when they first visited their grandparents in Washington State. Of course, my father cursed the many rocks that filled his garden soil and made it so very difficult to dig in. My own yard, like so many in Florida, is a rectangular area of sand crammed full of plants. It doesn't hold water well, but at least it's easy to dig in.

Floridians can buy rocks, of course, but why would we want to? Put simply, rocks make



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Raised beds walled by rock at the Cornell Plantations in Ithaca, NY, convey a sense of permanence.

things interesting. They are part of an often-neglected aspect of gardening: hardscape, the non-plant part of a landscape.

Hardscape includes pathways, borders, edging, walls, etc. These things give order, 3-dimensionality, compartmentalization, and pedestrian access to a garden. Hardscape also provides edging for ponds and a structural framework for waterfalls and fountains.

A professional landscaper will lay out the hardscape first, defining the beds before putting in the plants. Though we have a variety of materials for hardscape, including wood and concrete in numerous guises, nothing quite matches the natural, durable look of rocks. A rock retaining wall, border, or pathway is classy and looks like it will always be there; a naturalistic waterfall over solid rock takes us to a far-away wild area.

In "The Classical Chinese Garden" (Aug/Sep '07), I em-



photo by Frederick B. Essig

Barrel cacti and other succulents blend in naturally with a pile of rocks.



The Sherman Library and Botanical Garden in Corona del Mar, California, maintains a beautiful succulent garden.

phasized the importance of rocks in traditional Chinese gardens, where they are used to create the illusion of a mountainous natural landscape. Traditional Japanese gardeners employ rocks as well, sometimes in naturalistic land-

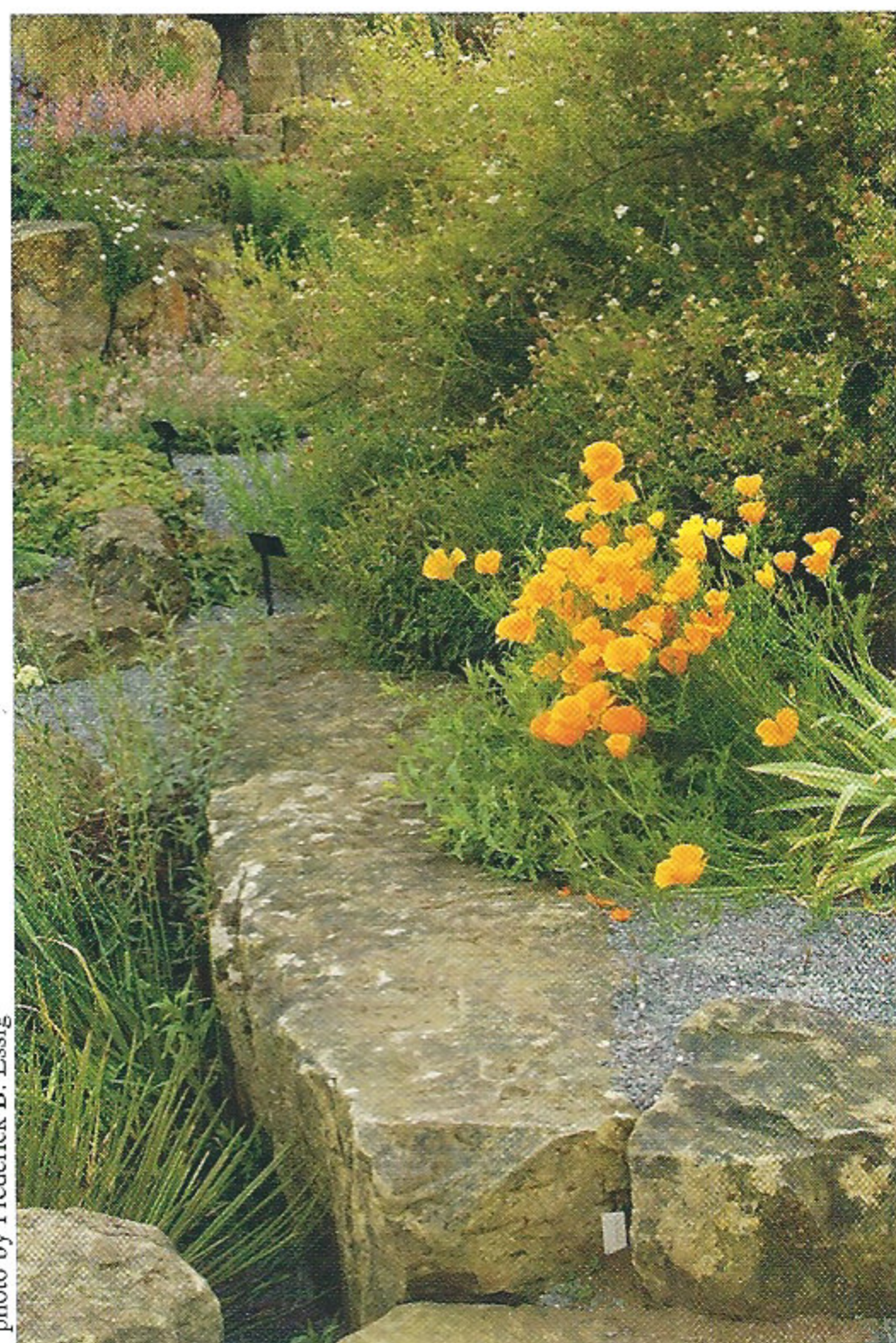
scapes, but sometimes as elements of a more abstract piece of art that may even be devoid of plants.

Throughout the western world, "rock gardens" have long been popular. These also simulate natural rocky landscapes and provide in their nooks and crannies growing spaces for a great variety of small plants. Rock gardens typically embody the western craving for novelty and diversity (as opposed to the philosophically-constrained simplicity of the traditional Chinese garden), and each rock garden displays its owner's success at developing a unique collection.

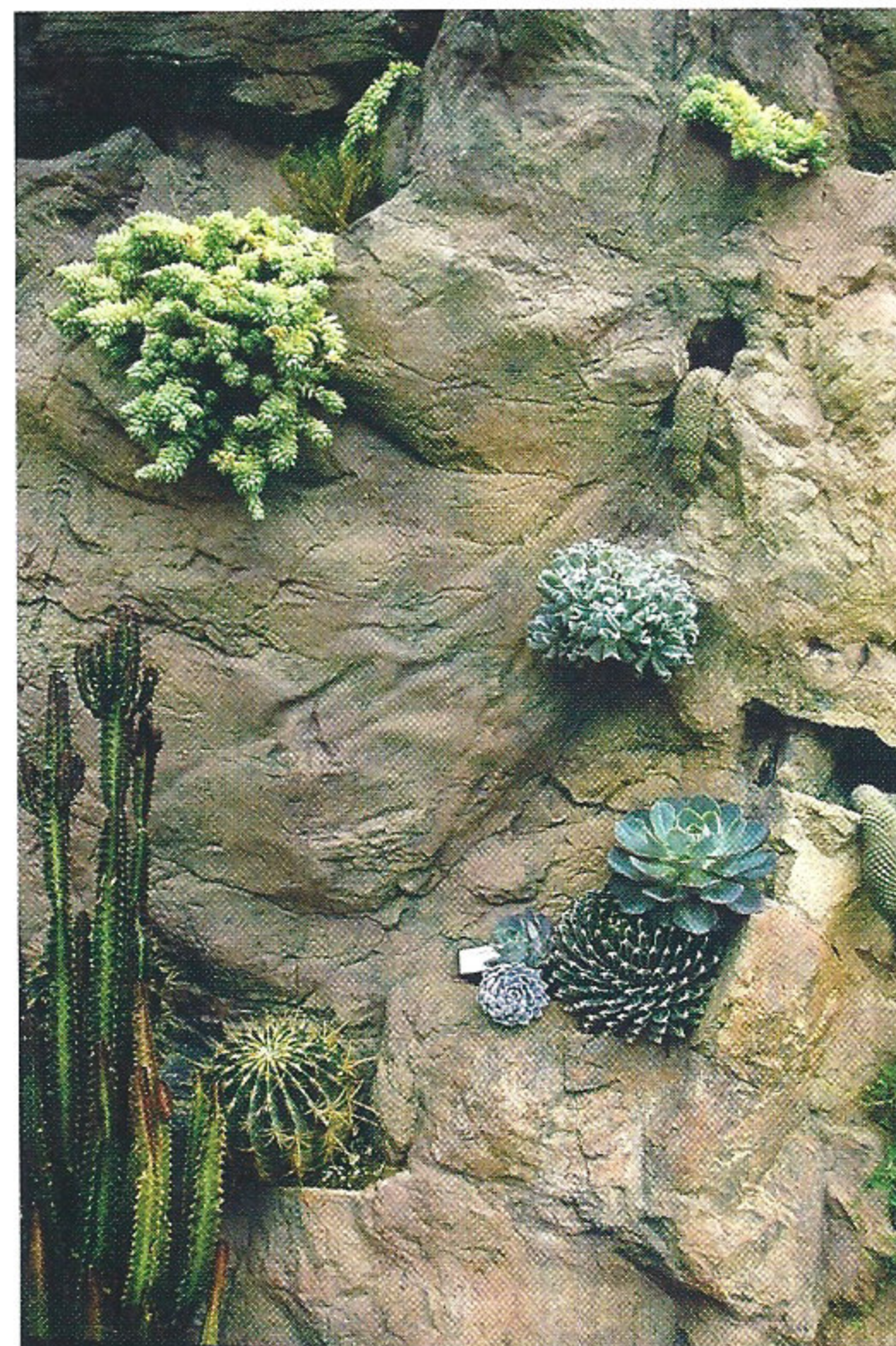
The type of plant collection in a rock garden can be almost anything, and is not constrained by cli-

mate. Plants are typically small perennials suitable for confinement to small pockets of soil among the rocks. Native plants or wild types of plants from other parts of the world are favored over heavily-bred, conventional garden flowers. This is not a place for rose bushes or flashy beds of perennials.

Alpine plants and other diminutive plants of rocky, exposed places are ideal for rock gardens throughout the cooler parts of North America and Europe. But in warmer, drier locales, cacti and succulents are quite at home among a jumble of rocks. Many fabulous succulent rock gardens can be found in California and other southwestern states, and are a real possibility here in Florida. We just have to choose varieties that tolerate our humidity, heavy summer rains, and occasional winter frost. For tropical plants, a



California poppies look right at home in Kew's rock garden.



Rock walls offer nooks for a variety of plants.



A stream of succulents flows through this rock garden.

rocky wall, such as the one in the conservatory at Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota (www.selby.org), is an ideal display for a variety of orchids, bromeliads, and other epiphytes. Anyone interested in developing a rock garden in Florida would have no trouble finding plants to put in it.

A few well-placed rocks might be all that is needed to create the right effect; with a

larger budget, a wild rocky hideaway, complete with canyons and waterfalls, can be created. The relatively new rock garden at Kew Gardens in England provides an excellent model of what can be done:

(www.kew.org/places/kew/rockgarden.html)

How does one get rocks in this rock-forsaken state? Well, we do have limestone beneath us, not too far beneath us in much of southern Florida, in fact. I've heard tales of people in the Miami area using dynamite to create holes for planting trees. The rest of us have the option of using some of that limestone in our gardens. Limestone, however, limits the plant selection to those that tolerate high pH, such as many types of succulents.

It is easy enough to obtain a wide variety of rocks through landscape material suppliers, and you could select something harder, smoother, and darker than our native limestone. Rocks are heavy, however, and the real expense is having them shipped.

Another option is artificial rock. The natural canyon-like atmosphere of the great ape enclosure at Busch Gardens was achieved by the clever use of artificial rock walls and boulders. Then there's Thunder Mountain in the Magic Kingdom...! A quick Internet search turns up a number of companies that provide instructions and materials for making artificial rocks, as well as lightweight, pre-formed rocks.

Like the "got milk" commercials on TV, if you don't have any rocks, maybe you should run out and get some!

With his article on classical Chinese gardens in our last issue, and this one on rocks, Dr. Essig is throwing down the gauntlet to Florida gardeners to try something different.

The North American Rock Garden Association has approximately 4500 members, including a dozen or so in Florida, and puts out one of the most mouth-watering journals of any plant society. (www.nargs.org)

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