

December 1, 2024

Bob's News & Musings



The Creation of a Rock Garden or Three or Five

My newsletter from January 2024 has a section in the feature article that gives direction for creating a rock garden. It is an excellent reference for anyone planning to construct such a garden. My May through September issues show the construction of a massive rock garden at South Seattle College.

I built five different rock gardens at my Eatonville home, and I kept a photographic record of each one. The first rock garden was constructed on a bank be-

hind our house. It was visible from the kitchen window and next to our patio. I will show that one first.

The second rock garden was part of a quarter-acre oriental garden I constructed at the south-east end of our property. Rocks are a very important part of any oriental garden and making a rock garden part of one is an easy thing to do.

My third rock garden covered about a half acre and was very extensive. It was a major

construction project and required about forty tons of rock- mostly granite with some black basalt.

A fourth garden was built onto the flat area that comprised my lower Coenosium Gardens retail area. The retail area was moved to a smaller area along one of the gravel roads.

A fifth rock garden was built behind the propagation greenhouse.

The picture below shows our Eatonville home. A rock garden slopes down to it.



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House Rock Garden Before

We had to cut a flat area into the sloped property to place our manufactured home. When we did, we ended up with a rocky dirt bank behind the house. I figured it would make a nice garden area. I planted a mix of conifers that produced an area without much aesthetic value. After a few years it developed as shown below.

I had two major problems with the garden. First, several of the plants had outgrown their usefulness. Second, the round rocks did not work very well for garden interest. The soil was glacial till and had rocks ranging from pebble-size to basketball-size made up about 40% of the total volume. It was great for drainage but a pain for digging.

I redid the garden by removing the overgrown conifers and replacing them with miniatures. However, I developed a new hardscape before I did any of the new plantings. I found a source for pumice where I could purchase any size I wanted up to the size of a 1967 Volkswagon Beetle. That way I could place some very large rocks into the garden without developing a hernia. Also, since the blocks were so porous, I could drill large holes into them and grow small plants in those holes.

Then I mulched with pea-size gravel called Rainbow Gravel. It was very colorful when wet. The garden is pictured on page 3 and was visible from the kitchen. It was also great to enjoy when sitting on the patio.



House Rock Garden After



Oriental Garden

This next series of pictures show the development of what I called an Oriental Garden. It had many aspects of a Japanese style garden but lacked many others. It had two rock garden features and a dry stream bed that was built using the rocks I dug out while digging holes for the plants.

One rock garden feature was constructed at the top of the sloped garden. The garden was developed on a slope due to the nature of the property. At the top of the slope, I had a steep bank about 8 feet high. It was constructed as a granitic outcrop with a wall constructed from basalt at its center.

The other rock garden feature was used to separate the Oriental Garden into two parts. It was a basaltic wall structure with planting beds and a small bog garden area.

Below: The upper garden in this view shows the upper rock garden area.



Oriental Garden

The upper picture below shows the lower half of the Oriental Garden with the dry river bed and the basaltic rock wall. The bog garden is to the left of the lantern.

The lower picture shows a tree that gives the impression of great age and creates a nice atmosphere for the garden. It is an old *Tsuga heterophylla* that developed from a seedling growing upon a nurse log. That is obvious due to the exposed root system.



Preparing Site for the Oriental Garden

I brought in a backhoe to remove the brush and any trees that were not going to be part of the landscape. The big Douglas firs were about sixty years old and I kept most of them. They were part of our second growth forest after the clearcut that removed the old growth back about 1920.



Preparing Site for the Oriental Garden



Oriental Garden Basalt Wall Area

Strictly speaking, not a rock garden, it can be considered a feature of a rock garden. The black basalt is available from a quarry near Olympia Washington. It works nicely as a contrast to colorful conifers. The white foliage that makes up much of *Pinus parviflora* 'Tanima no uki' and the yellow foliage present in *Juniperus conferta* 'Sunsplash' contrast nicely with the black rocks and the black Mondo Grass.

This structure divided the upper and lower areas of the Oriental Garden.



Oriental Garden Basalt Wall Area



Upper Rock Garden

The upper border of the Oriental Garden was the area of a rock garden. The topography of the area necessitated that I have a steep slope in this area. It was perfect for a rock garden made with granite. It is the same granite I used in other parts of the property so it would appear as if it was a natural bedrock in the area.

I constructed an inset with a basaltic retaining wall with the idea that it would appear as if a local farmer had built a rough feature to place some sort of a tribute to the gods and a spot where these gods could watch over the garden.



Upper Rock Garden



Upper Rock Garden Construction

We constructed the basaltic wall first and then we did the granitic rocks for the rock garden on each side of it.



Upper Rock Garden Construction



Lower Rock Garden

I had about a half acre of sloping land near the bottom of our property. I constructed a rock garden in that area. Below is the water feature in the center of the garden and to either side of this feature I constructed a rock garden using the same granite as my other gardens. I also used a row of basaltic rocks to represent an igneous intrusion cutting through the granite (pictures page 15). I always had the goal of making a rock garden appear as a natural geologic structure with plants growing upon it.

The year the garden was completed is shown in the two pictures on the next page.



Lower Rock Garden



Lower Rock Garden



A large excavator parked-out the section of property where I planned to build the garden. Parking-out removed the underbrush and “trash trees”, leaving the large Douglas firs without damaging them by rubbing bark off them by pushing logs and brush and stumps around with a bulldozer.



Lower Rock Garden

A small excavator was used to construct the rock garden since many of the rocks weighed over 300 pounds. A Bobcat brought the rocks down the slope from my upper road to the site.



Retail Area Rock Garden

Below is a picture of the main retail area for Coenosium Gardens with a display garden on the slope leading up to the greenhouse. When we decided to reduce our inventory, we relocated this sales area to a smaller piece of ground beside our upper road. Then we decided this area would make a nice garden. I did not plan to make it into an elaborate rockery. I figured this former sales area garden would be constructed with a nice sized berm and have large rocks scattered throughout.

A year later, I redid the display garden on the slope up to the greenhouse. It had gotten too overgrown. I used granite and made it into a rock garden with miniature and dwarf conifers. Most of the plants pictured here were removed. I only kept a few. The ground was too rocky to do any digging.



Retail Area Rock Garden

I purchased several truck loads of soil and compost for the garden and had it dumped in our cul-de-sac. I used my Kubota to haul the material to the site about 200 yards into the property.

The rocks in the trailer pictured below were pumice and were very light for their size. In fact, if dropped in water they would have floated. The biggest rock in the trailer weighed about 300 pounds. If granite, it would have exceeded two tons. I used these rocks throughout the new garden



Retail Area Rock Garden



Before building the berms, I subsoiled the garden area. The areas I did not subsoil were reserved for constructing gravel pathways. I laid ground cloth and poured gravel over it. That way the gravel would not settle into any mud during the early spring freeze and thaw cycles. I was being extra cautious since I did not have any muddy areas due to the 40% rock content of my soil.

The bottom picture shows a load of soil being hauled to the site.



Retail Area Rock Garden

These are pictures of the garden soil and the pumice rocks being placed. The planting progressed as the soil was put in place and mixed with the compost.

The walkways were bordered with a low wall of granite rocks.



Retail Area Rock Garden

I had plenty of high quality plant material from my own inventory and the garden developed into one of our more popular areas for visitors.



Retail Area Rock Garden



Greenhouse Rock Garden

I had some nice pumice boulders that I decided to use to build a small rock garden behind my greenhouse. The garden was filled with miniature conifers and I even constructed a trough garden without a bottom so the plants would not dry out. I did this same thing in another garden where I built two very large trough gardens in place. I never planned on moving them, so I made a wood form for each one and mixed peat, pumice, sand, and cement for the walls.

I mulched the garden with the same Rainbow Gravel I used for the house rock garden.



Greenhouse Rock Garden



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Jan Beran, Czech Republic

Jan liked to build rock gardens by dumping truckloads of soil into ma large pile and then embedding rocks throughout the pile. It appeared to work just fine.



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Jan Beran, Czech Republic



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Jim Cross, Long Island

The late Jim Cross lived on Long Island and built this rock garden outside his bedroom where he could enjoy it every time he looked out the window or walked outside through the room's patio doors.



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Kas Koemans, Holland

This garden in Holland belonged to the late Kas Koemans. This picture shows about 20% of the total garden. He made great use of red cinder rock, similar to the rock found in eastern Oregon, throughout the garden. The red color worked nicely with the yellows, blues, and greens of the dwarf conifers scattered throughout the garden.



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Kew Gardens, England

I remember my first time visiting Kew Gardens. There was a great little pub near the main gate and a used book store that carried a nice selection of old conifer books. The gardens themselves were well worth the visit. However, I felt the rock gardens looked more like a series of wall gardens. I would have liked to see more conifers in the gardens.



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Kew Gardens, England



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Ladislav Krejci, Czech Republic

This particular rock garden is the “real thing”. It was created in an old rock quarry of sandstone and quartzite. There is a natural spring and small pond at the base. When we visited with Ladislav, we had to wait until he finished working a section of his farm. He is an avid collector and had over a thousand of the San Sebastian witches’ brooms all grafted on low standards for observation.

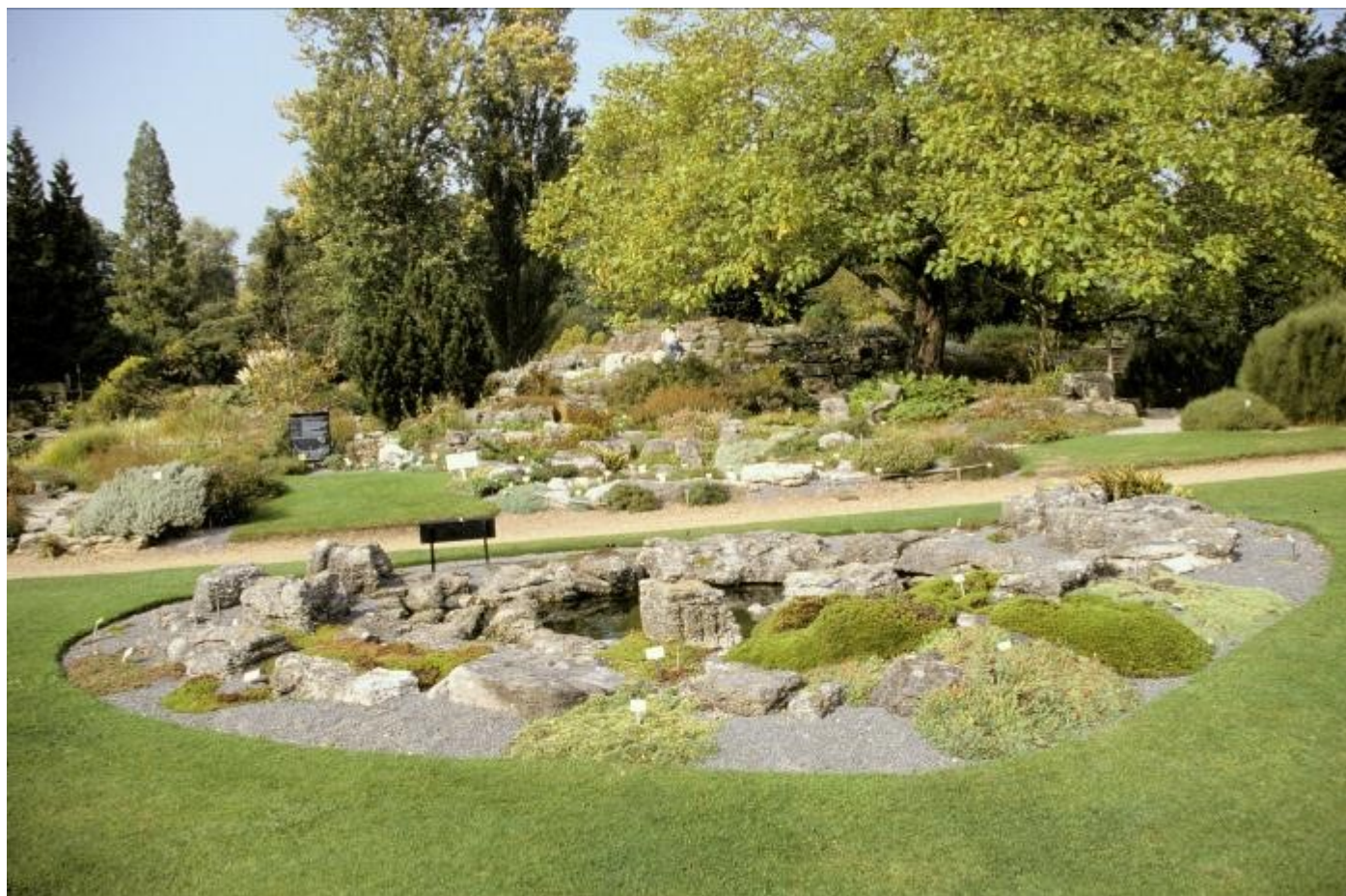


Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Ladislav Krejci, Czech Republic



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Cambridge Botanic Garden, England

The rock garden here was a bit different. It had a water feature that was separated from the main rock garden as seen in the picture below. The rock garden had wall-like sections as well as a section where a narrow path went about five feet below the surface.



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Cambridge Botanic Garden, England



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Tatla Garden, Czech Republic

I saw this extensive rock garden during my first visit to the Czech Republic. It was different and obviously a major construction project. The Czech Republic is famous for the rock gardens that are found throughout the country. Their main focus is on alpines, but the miniature and dwarf conifers are getting well-known and used much more extensively as time passes.

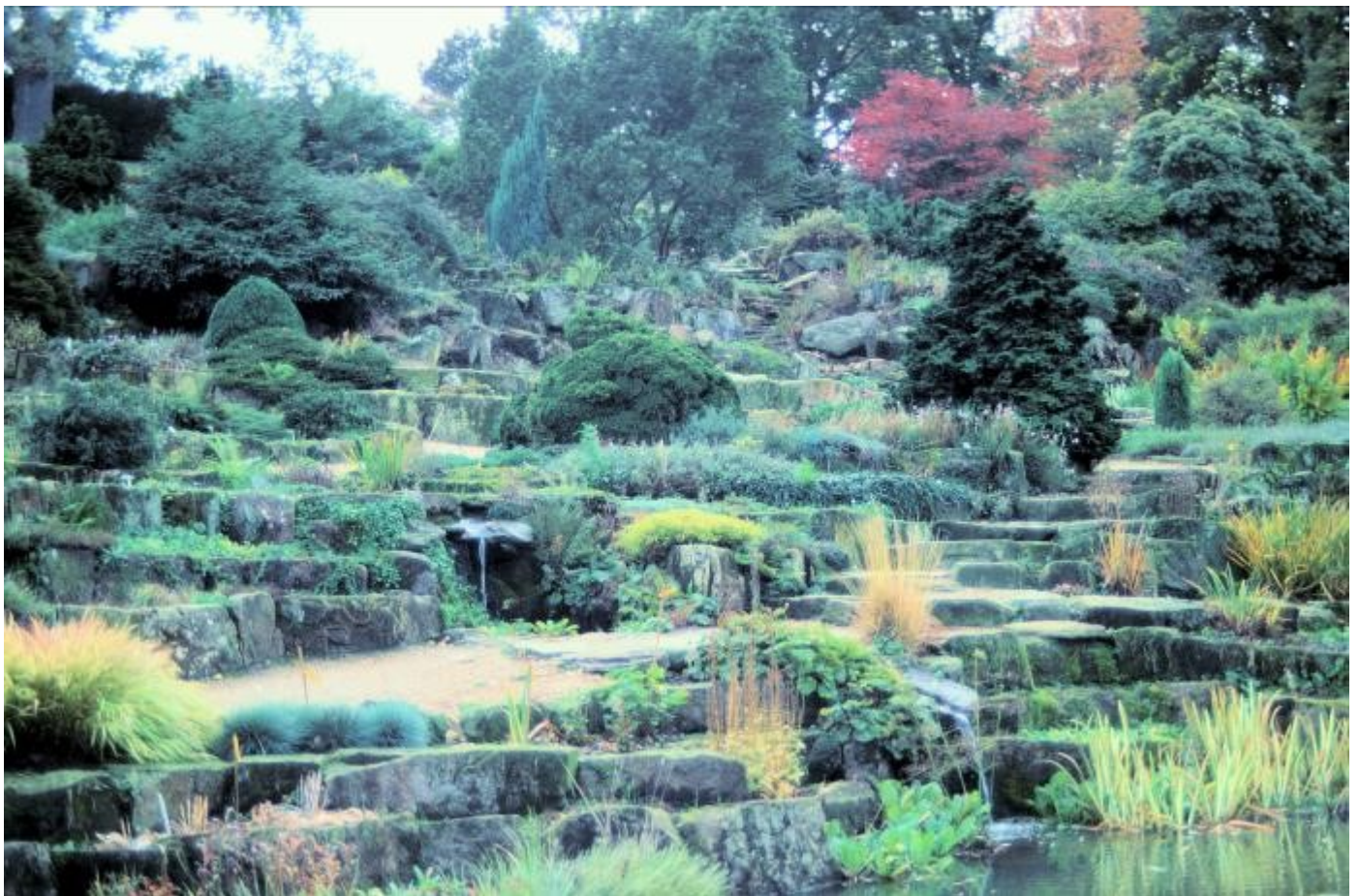


Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Tatla Garden, Czech Republic



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Wisley Garden, England

The RHS garden at Wisley has a well-known rock garden that uses some of the practices from Kew. It has a nice assortment of plants with a few interesting conifers.



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Wisley Garden, England



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Gary & Tom Wittenbaugh, Iowa

This small rock garden is very familiar to Midwesterners. Gary is no longer with us, but Tom still maintains the gardens. His handiwork is present in the structures and hardscapes found throughout the gardens. The rock garden is a treat and an exercise in ingenuity.



Rock Gardens I Have Visited: Gary & Tom Wittenbaugh, Iowa



Conifer of the Month: *Cupressus arizonica* var. *Glabra* 'Chaparral'

A dense, broadly columnar selection, *Cupressus arizonica* var. *glabra* 'Chaparral' is best known for its fine, almost juvenile, creamy-white foliage that does not burn in the full sun. It was discovered as a seedling by John Emery, Drue Nursery, Berry, New South Wales, Australia, and introduced about 1980. *Cupressus arizonica* var. *glabra* 'Chaparral' strikes from cuttings better than the species.



Conifer of the Month: *Cupressus arizonica* var. *Glabra* 'Chaparral'

When grafted, it performs best on *Cupressocyparis × leylandii* understock.

The photo here shows a twenty-year old graft with a nice graft union at Coenosium Gardens. It is one of the plants I imported from Australia and was grafted on *Cupressocyparis × leylandii* 'Star Wars', which is very easy to root.



Tree of the Month: *Fagus sylvatica* 'Pendula'

Fagus sylvatica 'Pendula' has branches that spread horizontally before drooping down toward the ground. Periodically a leader will emerge to raise the tree to a greater height before forming another ring of pendulous branches. If the branches lay against each other, they will pleach (graft) together. Likewise, branches will root if they lay in contact with the ground. This form originated in England about 1836.

The picture on the next page shows a ring of trees that developed from rooted branches that surrounded an old specimen. The old, original tree has died and the remains of its stump can be seen in the inset picture.



Tree of the Month: *Fagus sylvatica* 'Pendula'



Tree of the Month: *Fagus sylvatica* 'Pendula'

This cultivar is at its best during the winter when the branch structure can be observed as seen in the picture below and the one on the next page.



Tree of the Month: *Fagus sylvatica* 'Pendula'



Blast From The Past: GORDON BENTHAM

A retired meat cutter from British Columbia with a nonstop sense of humor and a generous disposition became a good friend. Gordon Bentham was known to plant collectors from Victoria, British Columbia to southern California. He was always looking for new conifers to add to his collection or to distribute to specialist nurseries for propagation and marketing to the public.

Gordon was a very generous man. He was very active in the Pa-

cific Northwest distributing new conifers that had been found by William Goddard at his Flora-Vista Gardens in Victoria, British Columbia. He would give small plants to several of the Oregon nurseries so they could build up the numbers and get them into the nursery trade in the United States.

Gordon was not a plant propagator. He was not in the business of selling plants for a living. He collected conifers for the love of them and a desire to see the better ones become available to everyone. The only group of conifers he claimed to have no use for was *Picea abies*. He always said to me that they all looked alike or reverted so much as to be almost worthless to the dwarf conifer lover. 'Pachyphylla' was his one exception. We had several spirited conversations over some of his comments. I often believe that he said things like that to get a rise out of me and to enliven our conversations.

After we moved to Oregon, Gordon visited occasionally and enjoyed seeing my collection. His interests had narrowed to the true dwarfs with an emphasis on the pines. He was redoing his home to have the choicest plants of his collection landscaped in a special setting. He had given almost everything else away and just wanted a collection that fitted the size of his property.

Gordon died suddenly on Christmas Day in 1988.



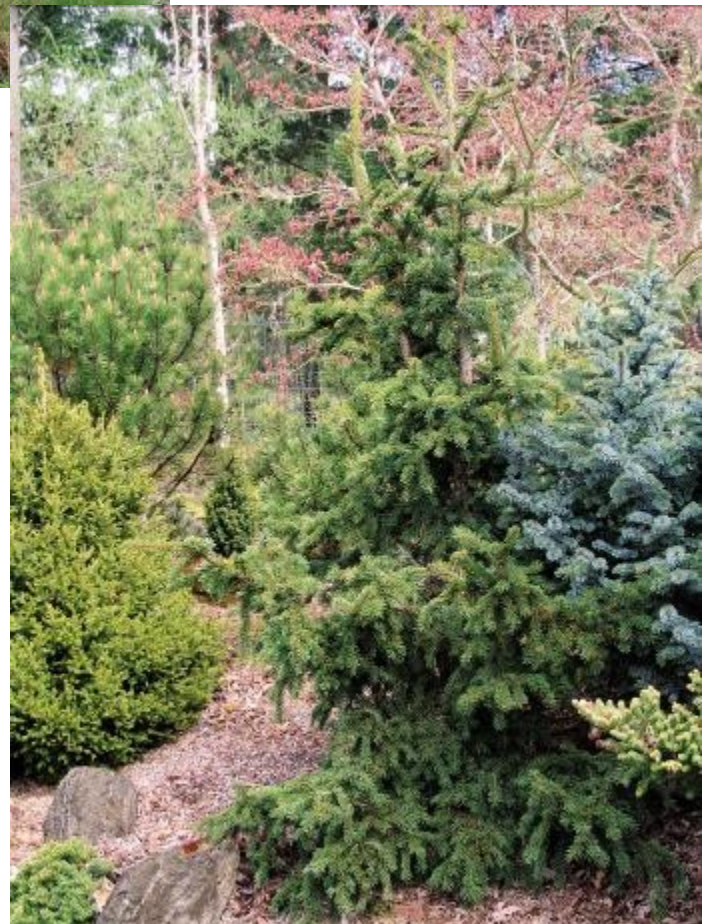
Blast From The Past: GORDON BENTHAM

Gordon was not very prolific at discovering new plants, but he was excellent at getting new discoveries into nurseries and collectors gardens. He worked with the Goddards at Flora Vista Nursery in Victoria, British Columbia and shared their discoveries with collectors in the lower 48 states.

One of their introductions was the *Cedrus deodara* ‘Silver Mist’ above.

The foliage picture is of *Picea sitchensis* ‘Bentham’s Sunlight’, which he helped save.

To the right is the only *Picea abies* that Gordon liked- ‘Pachyphylla’. He often said it has the most distinctive foliage of all the selections from that species.



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The Good Old Days

The next time you are washing your hands and complain because the water temperature isn't just how you like it, think about how things used to be.

Here are some facts about the 1500s:

Most people got married in June because they took their yearly bath in May, and they still smelled pretty good by June.. However, since they were starting to smell Brides carried a bouquet of flowers to hide the body odor. Hence the custom today of carrying a bouquet when getting Married.

Baths consisted of a big tub filled with hot water. The man of the house had the privilege of the nice clean water, then all the other sons and men, then the women and finally the children. Last of all the babies. By then the water was so dirty you could actually lose someone in it.. Hence the saying, "Don't throw the baby out with the Bath water!"

Houses had thatched roofs-thick straw-piled high, with no wood underneath. It was the only place for animals to get warm, so all the cats and other small animals (mice, bugs) lived in the roof. When it rained it became slippery and sometimes the animals would slip and fall off the roof... Hence the saying "It's raining cats and dogs."

There was nothing to stop things from falling into the house. This posed a real problem in the bedroom where bugs and other droppings could mess up your nice clean bed. Hence, a bed with big posts and a sheet hung over the top afforded some protection. That's how canopy beds came into existence.

In Future Issues



This issue of News and Musings was focused on rock garden construction with some examples. It was exceptionally heavy on the pictures. As I mentioned in the beginning, descriptive text about building a rock garden was in my January 2024 issue.

At some point I will feature an article on trough and container gardening. Troughs are a great way to miniaturize alpine gardens (rock gardens).

My January issue will resume my series of articles on conifers that are well suited to growing in a rock garden.

I will also continue my Blast From the Past for a few more issues and a western short story in three

parts. I will also resume my series of chapters from my book about teaching science in middle and high schools.

Can you guess where this picture was taken?

