

**The Rock Garden Meadow:  
A Contrast and Relief from the Rocky Garden**

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If you are in a bonsai club, you're expected to have a lot of little trees beautifully trained in pots and not necessarily anything else in your garden. I've visited many a succulent collector in Southern California where the entire garden was bristling with cacti, aloes, agaves—anything succulent and not much else. The same phenomenon occurs with many collectors: dahlia, hosta, conifer, iris—most any specialist collection is often arrayed in rows often surrounded by bare soil. There are “native plant gardens” where any plant from beyond an arbitrary political boundary is eschewed, banished, reviled!

And then there are rock gardeners. I suppose you have alpine gardeners in Britain who may possess only teeny plants in pots—but in North America rock gardening is truly catholic (not necessarily in the religious sense! I'm Orthodox after all): I don't think I've ever visited a rock gardener in our continent who didn't have some special trees, unique shrubs, a patch of woodland and often a pond, a bog and perhaps even a dry spot with some cacti.

Rock gardens aspire to the peaks, but we are always nestled in reality. Our art exemplifies the Taoist principle expressed in chapter 11 of the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu:

“Mold clay into a bowl  
The empty space makes it useful...  
Therefore, the value comes from what is there  
But the use comes from what is not there.”

Perhaps the best example of a “not there” of rock gardening would be a meadow. The “alpine lawn” has been a feature described in many rock gardens—which can manifest itself in any number of forms. In Colorado many of us have patches of buffalo grass (*Buchloe dactyloides*) or blue gramma grass (*Bouteloua gracilis*) which are the dominant short grasses of the Great Plains. These provide an ideal matrix for spring and fall bulbs—not to mention perennials like *Liatris punctata*, that benefit from the competition of grass roots. For others a lawn can be a few square feet or yards of thyme or veronica that provide a contrast and relief from the rocky garden presence and venue for social plants.

Anyone who's designed a meadow knows it's every bit as tricky as creating a crevice or other rock garden. I've noticed a half dozen or more books on the subject published in just the last few years. Midwestern designers like Roy Diblik have raised the tall-grass prairie to new heights (so to speak) and I was transfixed when I visited Great Dixter: the “lawns” there are fantastic anthologies of indigenous orchids and all manner of wildflowers that have become increasingly rare in overpopulated Britain.

**I invite you to sign up for NARGS last Webinar of this winter season scheduled for Saturday February 19th.** This will be the first time I know of that an entire symposium has been dedicated to the creation of meadows and the use of grasses and graminoids in rock gardens. The talks are being orchestrated by Kenton Seth, better known for his crevice garden creations around the world: Kenton designs all manner of gardens, and meadows are especially near and dear to his heart. I have no doubt this Webinar will be revelatory and great fun: do check the NARGS website ([www.nargs.org](http://www.nargs.org)) in the coming months for further announcements and a sign up to this seminar!

For some views of a Colorado prairie check out this post:

<http://prairiebreak.blogspot.com/2017/09/prairie-daze-magical-preserve-north-of.html>