



RICHARD BLESS JR., GAZETTE PHOTOS

Martin on one of the rocks used for seats.

## GARDENING

# Mary Martin's garden of rocks

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Rocks are everywhere in Mary Martin's garden. There are walls of rocks, raised beds behind borders of rocks and narrow rock pathways to get to the back of deep flower beds.

Large rocks are used as seats. Others are prominently displayed as individual specimens in garden beds. There's a pond surrounded by a delightful mixture of rocks, stones and pebbles.

The driveway is covered with rounded pebbles instead of asphalt. Even some of the beds are mulched with a variety of stones and gravel.

And nearly all of them were dug up and collected

from her own garden, as Martin laid lawns and dug new flower beds while landscaping her Beaconsfield property since moving there 12 years ago.

"Everywhere I dug in this garden I found rocks," Martin said. "There were loads of very tiny ones and others right up to boulder size. And I've found a use for all of them."

There was something about the property that appealed to her right from the moment she saw it. It's a corner property, wider at the back than the front, and even though there were trees and rocks all over the place she could see it had lots of potential.

"We took down most of the trees and cleared the scrub bushes off the land, then we put in a cedar hedge all around the sides as a backdrop, and I started making the garden."

She saved all the stones and rocks as she dug in the garden. She used the larger rocks to provide low walls for her raised beds.

She recalls finding a small boulder in a hole where she wanted to plant a birch tree about four years ago. "My son David was helping me and I said to leave it and let the roots grow around it. But he's like me, so he dug it clear, flipped it up and left it beside the planting hole, and it's still there now."

The boulder beside the birch helps to provide the contrast that Martin likes to arrange in her designs.

"I adore the hardness of the rock and the gentleness of the plants and the softness of the moss on it. I put the moss there deliberately, and spread pebbles on the ground between the tree and the rock to link them together."

Another project came about after cutting down a diseased maple tree in the back garden. The hole left behind after the roots and stump were removed became the perfect place for a pond. Martin and her son dug and built the whole thing, which now occupies a whole corner of the garden. It ended up about 20 feet

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# Rocks cropped up wherever

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long by 12 feet wide and 30 inches deep in the middle.

"It was tough digging in the red clay, even though it was quite soft. But of course, there were rocks to contend with, too."

Martin remembers that one of them is still there.

"We were uncovering what looked like quite a huge slab. By then we'd had a bit of experience with moving rocks, so David and I looked at each other and decided to leave that one where it was. We just patted the sandy loam over it and made it a bump in the bottom of the pond."

Once they'd dug out the actual shape they wanted, they laid sandy loam everywhere.

"It's easy to pat into the right contours, and it covers all the rough spots. Then we put down a geo-membrane, which is like a heavy felt, then the heavy plastic pond liner, and then another one of the geo-membranes on top."

As a result of having added this last membrane, Martin has noticed that all the particles that fall into the pond have clung to it. She feels it gives the pond bottom a really natural look, as well as establishing a natural chemistry.

## Millstone waterflow

"A few days after we put the water in, several little bugs were already swimming in it, and now it has snails and lots of algae. That's good for the small goldfish, and they're growing quite well. I think a pond has to find its own ecology, and I'm happy to leave it like that."

At one end of the pond is a millstone that was a gift from a friend in Senneville. By hiding a submersible pump under it, and fitting a pipe up through the centre hole, there's always a gentle flow of water cascading over the stone into the pond, helping to aerate it.

Martin filled one end of the pond with rounded stones and pebbles, making a shallow area that's popular with the local wildlife.

"It attracts lots of birds because they use the shallow end as their little bathing area, and I've caught raccoons and cats drinking from it

on occasion."

In the winter Martin leaves the water in the pond, and an electric heater keeps it just above freezing. Part of the surface stays unfrozen for the fish, which go into a dormant phase until the spring.

"I also added some pots of pink water lilies that came from a friend with a pond, and I have grasses as well. They're all perennial so they don't need to be brought in during the winter."

Some of the rocks used in decorating the pond area weren't dug up in the usual way. Like the three large rocks that are placed near one end of the pond.

"I moved them there for people to sit on," Martin said. "They were up in the corner of the lot, and the family helped me to roll them down. I arranged them with their flat sides up, and I think they look very inviting."

Also inviting is the beautiful driveway of brown pebbles approaching Martin's house. They make a pleasant scrunching noise when tires and feet pass over them.

Martin used more rocks as the solution to an expensive problem.

"I was going to use interlocking pavers for the driveway but that was too expensive. And asphalt needs a complicated bed underneath with the right slope on either side. So pebbles ended up being the cheapest solution."

There's a 2-inch layer of brown five-eighths-inch pebbles sitting on a base of brown crushed stone, both laid on the bare ground. Martin hasn't had any problems with weeds sprouting up through them, and she hasn't lost any of the pebbles during snow clearing.

Martin wanted to make the new driveway wider as well, so they started digging on either side of the old roadbed to extend it and, lo and behold, more rocks.

"My family kept telling me we didn't need more rocks around the house, but I knew they were the biggest rocks I've ever had on the property."

So with the help of a backhoe, Martin piled them up and used them all to make a little alpine rocky right beside the new driveway.

"Along with a huge one in the

# Beaconsfield gardener dug

centre, I arranged them all with their flat sides upwards so you can walk across them. Then I filled in the spaces between them with gritty soil, and mulched the surface with varying sizes of stones and the extra pebbles from the driveway to make the pattern of a stream bed running through it."

The alpine bed with its large stones has a mixture of small sun-loving, drought-tolerant perennials in it. There are prickly pear cactuses, hens and chickens (*sempervivum*), *festuca ovina* grass, *dianthus*, heather, coral bells and several types of thyme.

For variety, on the opposite side of the property under large trees is a shade garden, full of lush-looking perennials like *astilbe*, *hosta* and day lilies. Plus, of course, the obligatory rock pathways and retaining walls to keep them all in order.

## Raised on railway ties

One place that's surprisingly devoid of rocks is a sunny little garden hidden in a nook in the hedge, a bed that's raised up on railway ties. Martin uses it as a sort of nursery.

"When I built this I could afford to buy topsoil, so I filled it up and now I use it as a holding bed, as well as for a few tomatoes. There are cut-

tings and little seedlings and pieces that come up all over the garden, so as I find them I pop them in here to grow bigger, and then use them somewhere else later."

Martin has certainly made the best use of an available resource by deciding to work with the rocks that turned up on her property, rather than using them to stock a small quarry.

And she has a theory about where all the rocks came from, and it doesn't involve the end of the last ice age.

"I found out from a neighbor that apparently this piece of property stayed empty for a while, so it became the local dumping ground for rocks when the houses were being built around here."

"Some people see this as a problem, but I consider it as my lucky strike. Now everybody wants rocks from my garden."

Martin recently retired from her job, and she looks back on all the work that got the garden to the stage it's now.

"I did all of it on weekends, evenings and even after dark. My family bought me a miner's headlight as a joke so I could work at night. And now that I've retired it's all finished. All I have to do is weed it and enjoy it."

# The Martin soil solution

Mary Martin couldn't afford to keep buying all the soil she needed each year to build the flower beds she wanted, so she made her own as much as possible.

To fill a deep planting bed, she starts by pouring in as many bags of dried leaves as it takes to fill the bed.

"I collect bags of leaves from all the roads around here, taking them from neighbors, wherever. People say they take so many years to rot. But I used them as fill, along with broken up bales of hay people throw out after Halloween."

Martin uses this mix as a base for the beds, then puts whatever soil she has on top of it to press it down.

"Not long after, when I dig down to plant anything in a pocket, the

worms are there by the handful. I fill each planting pocket with compost and rotted leafmold, and I make the hole extra large so that the plants have something to grow into. Eventually the rest of the leaf fill decomposes into great soil."

Martin also has a giant compost pile going all summer. She uses the rich organic mix as needed for planting holes, and spreads the rest each fall. "The compost pile is my treasure chest, my gold mine. Right now I think you could cook toast on it. I just open it up in the fall and find this beautiful stuff in the middle, and that's the payoff."

"If you haven't got the money, you have to devise something else, and in the long run it turns out to be better as well as cheaper."

Stuart Robertson