



PLANT & GARDEN

CANADA'S PRACTICAL GARDENING MAGAZINE

May 2000

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SCULPTURE IN THE GARDEN

PROPER PLACEMENT IS NO ACCIDENT OF NATURE

By Lorraine Flanigan

We're rushed for time, a generation sandwiched between responsibilities for children and aging parents. The moments spent walking along a country road, skiing through woodland trails or picnicking beside the lake are all too brief. We spend so much time in our offices, in our homes, and in our cars, that we may have lost our connection with nature. That's the concern of stone sculptor and garden designer, Walt Rickli who sees a trend towards reconnecting with nature by using natural materials in our workplaces, homes and gardens.

"Most of my inspiration comes from nature," says Walt who uses granite, limestone, and sandstone to carve basins, fountains, troughs and sculptures into works of water art. When I visited his studio and garden last summer, I noticed how each piece seemed to belong where it stood in the garden, looking as if nature had had a hand in finding it the right home. But for Walt, the selection and placement of stone and water sculpture in the garden is no accident of nature. It requires an understanding and acceptance of some important principles. Here's what you should consider before adding a piece of natural sculpture to your garden.

Find A Special Place

Take a look at your garden. Is there a place where you sit each morning, quietly drinking your coffee before the bustle of the day begins? Do you retreat to a special corner to relax at the end of a hectic day? These are ideal areas for sculpture. "The site must already be a 'place' that has meaning for you," says Walt. Otherwise, the work just sits there, looking out of place.

If the area is a sanctuary, a small piece of sculpture may be all you need. He suggests placing it near you, where



"Rock Medicine" in Bankcroft granite by Walt Rickli.

you can reach out and touch the natural stone. He also thinks that concealed areas of a garden are fun to discover. By placing a fountain in a hidden nook, visitors intrigued by the sound of water will follow it into a secret garden. To Walt, the sounds and feel of nature in these private spaces of the garden help to ground us, bringing us closer to the natural world.

When placing sculpture in more prominent areas of the garden, view the space from as many angles as you can, he advises. "See how it looks from an entranceway, or from the windows inside the house, and from different 'rooms' in the garden."

It's also important to think about how the piece looks in fall, winter and spring when bad weather keeps you indoors. Consider adding a water basin to the sculpture to attract birds so you can watch them through the windows of the house. Also remember that low-lying pieces look great in the summertime when you can walk around them, but for the rest of the year they are hard to see from inside the house.

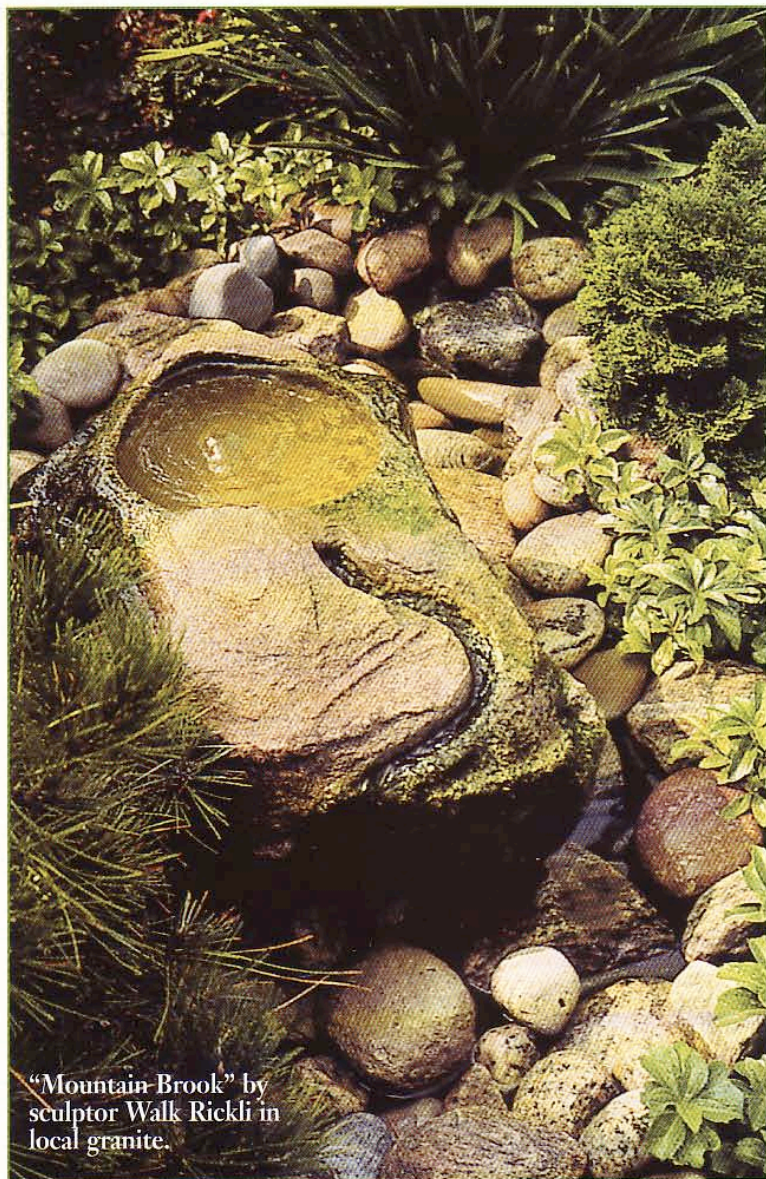
Use Plants

Evergreens, groundcovers, perennials and trees are essential partners for sculpture. "Evergreens anchor stone, softening it," says Walt. They also bring a large piece back into scale, making it more approachable.

Groundcovers do the same for water troughs and basins, elevating the ground surrounding the sculpture so that it appears sunken and nestled into the garden. A host of perennials complement stone sculpture, too. Hostas, ferns and astilbes planted close to the base of the work break the edges and add dimension. Perennials are seasonal, and to Walt it's fun to use seasons to our advantage, watching how a piece changes from the height of summer when plants hide much of the sculpture, to



This quiet garden sanctuary is the ideal site for the weathered limestone basin by Walt Rickli.



“Mountain Brook” by sculptor Walt Rickli in local granite.

sunny, winter days when bare flower stems trace shadow lines over the stone. The shade cast by a canopy of trees also works magic on stone sculpture.

“Many photographers agree that a good time to take pictures is on an overcast day,” says Walt. That’s because bright sunlight saturates colour, making surfaces one-dimensional. Locating a piece of sculpture under the shade of a tree restores dimension to the stone, allowing us to see the nuances of texture and shape.

Add The Sounds Of Water

Introduce water to the garden in as natural a way as you can, he says. “If you listen to a brook, you’ll hear a dozen different sounds.” It splashes over rocks, trickles through a narrow gap and gurgles against the shoreline. When he carves a water run, Walt tries to mimic these sounds, making the sculpture as natural-sounding as possible. While the sounds of water shouldn’t be so intrusive that it drowns out conversation, it must have some volume, especially in a city garden where it helps to block out the noise of street traffic.

Connect With Nature

“I’m involved in creating healing gardens,” says Walt. In a retirement home where one of his stone fountains sits, many of the residents are in wheelchairs and have trouble seeing clearly. “But, they hear the water and reach out and feel it on their hands, and suddenly there’s a big smile on their faces.” Something wonderful happens when we connect with nature, says Walt. So, reach out and touch a bit of nature in your own garden.

Winter Care For Stone Fountains

1. Heat the tank — If you want your fountain to function all winter long, leave the water in the tank or reservoir, but keep it from freezing with a submersible electric heater (power varies from 200 to 1500 watts). These heaters trigger when temperatures go below 35°F, so Walt’s electricity bills are still pretty reasonable. Even in winter water evaporates, so check the water level every week, topping it up whenever necessary to prevent your pump from running dry and burning out. Also check for ice build-up on the surface. If this happens, you’ll lose a lot of water that will flow over the top.

2. Drain the tank and remove the pump — With this method, the fountain does not function during the winter. Unless the reservoir is made of fiberglass, remove all of the water as well as the pump, storing it until spring. The basin or bowl of the fountain must be protected from cracking from the moisture that builds up over the winter. Walt lines the basin with styrofoam chips which absorb the pressure of expanding water as it freezes. Then, to hide the styrofoam, he covers it with pea gravel

Note: A simple way of protecting ponds over winter without draining them is to float a large piece of lumber in the water. 