

A steep site, poor soil and salt-laden wind were just what this couple were looking for when they took on this garden in Cornwall. Oh, and the incredible sea views

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# *Sheer genius*





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Mary and Vincent have enjoyed the challenge of turning a cliff into a garden, even if a crowbar is sometimes needed to make the planting holes; *Briza media* is also known as Quaking Grass owing to the way it moves in the slightest breeze; looking down on the house from one of the paths that winds around the garden; Snow in Summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*) is a carpet of silver foliage smothered with white flowers in summer. Ideal in rocky crevices, it is very invasive in more fertile gardens; the holly tree has been sculpted by the wind; bird's foot trefoil has seeded itself in the garden; a small lawn has been retained in a flat area above the house; the graceful deep purple *Iris sibirica*



Most gardeners would rest on their laurels once the garden they rescued from neglect – after several years' hard labour – was finally the way they wanted it to be. Especially if it was much admired and regularly won top prizes in the hotly contested Looe in Bloom competition. Lounging on laurels was not an option for Victor and Mary Crawford, however. 'Victor and I were talking vaguely about moving,' Mary explains. 'I went off one day to take my turn in the town centre with the collecting tin for the NSPCC and when I got back, he said he had phoned the estate agent about Rock Ledge. There wasn't anyone living here at the time, so we couldn't get into the house, but we walked through the garden, sat at the top and said to one another, "This is what we want". We weren't worried about seeing inside the house – we could always change the interior – but we couldn't change the location, with its views of Looe Harbour and the river on one side, the wild cliffs on the other and all that sea, with St George's Island half a mile offshore.'

### HUGH STEPS IN

Rock Ledge – the name says it all – is perched on a rocky promontory high above Looe. It is not a place where you would expect to see much in the way of a garden and when the Crawfords moved in 14 years ago, that was certainly the case. 'When we arrived, most of the slope was grass, the holly tree was here, as well as a lilac thicket, which has gone now,' Mary says. 'All that grass seemed rather stupid – it took half a day to mow and with only seven centimetres of soil beneath it, it was never going to look great.'

However magnificent the position, the Crawfords realised that with so little soil and regular battering by salt-laden wind, they needed help to understand how to garden in such an exposed position. Step in garden designer Hugh O'Connell. 'It was one of the most extreme and exciting projects I've ever undertaken,' he says, 'but it was wonderful to be able to make use of the natural land forms.' The knowledge he brought to the project – the way that wind and rocks interact and of Rock Ledge's geology – are at the heart of this garden. By selecting areas for planting where the wind was filtered or deflected by the shape of the land or by the sheltering effect of buildings, Hugh was able to design a garden without using conventional windbreaks that would have interfered with the views.

### SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

Work began with the removal of most of the lawn (one small patch remains) to reveal the bare rock, with its attractive stony outcrops and water-channelling fissures. Loose stone was harvested and used to build low retaining walls for planting pockets in places sheltered from the strongest winds. Very few parts of the garden are entirely wind-free, though, so plants had to be resilient to survive. The most exposed spots are planted with low-growing plants, mulched with stone and rock. This mulch retains moisture and also decreases the wind speed by creating friction over the rough stone surfaces. Once

the major work was completed – and it was major, with 50 tonnes of soil dug out by hand and removed from the site when the lawn was taken up – it was time for Mary and Victor to swing into action.

While Hugh's work uncovered the garden's potential, there is no avoiding the fact that gardening on a cliff is hard work. 'We definitely need young, fit people to cart stuff from time to time,' Mary says, 'and planting often involves the use of a crowbar. That was the way I planted a long hedge. When Victor saw it, he said they were beautifully planted but they were all leaning at the same angle! Easily done when you work on slopes all the time, but they soon straightened themselves out. The main thing is to plant small and let the roots find their own way through the rock. It's definitely survival of the fittest at Rock Ledge.'

### SITE-SPECIFIC PLANTING

Mary takes a very pragmatic approach when it comes to choosing what to grow – her choice is mostly dictated by 'right plant, right place'. She doesn't go in for Latin names or fancy cultivars, much preferring a good 'doer'. Asked about her favourite plants, her response is, 'How do you pick your favourite children? It depends how they are behaving at the time.' However, with a little encouragement, she admits to a much-loved myrtle that has travelled with them from their other garden and in its time has provided flowers for several wedding bouquets. And there's her growing enthusiasm for viburnums, both winter- and summer-flowering varieties, of which she now has several.

Many of the plants have been grown from cuttings (they brought a flatbed lorry-load of cuttings with them when they moved to Rock Ledge) and cultivar names are long forgotten. She is also very enthusiastic about the treasures she has found in the 'bargain basement' department of the Duchy of Cornwall Nursery at nearby Lostwithiel. Equally welcome are the plants that self-seed freely; sometimes these are wild flowers like foxgloves, bird's foot trefoil or the pretty pink and white daisy *Erigeron karvinskianus*, which now entirely covers the drive wall and stops passers-by in their tracks. 'I think I'm colonising the road with it now,' Mary laughs. While this is a plant that often spreads freely in mild coastal gardens, a more unusual plant for these conditions is the hosta, but by planting them along the strata of the rock, so that the water runs along the fissures and down to the roots, Mary has found that they grow surprisingly well.

Rock Ledge is a remarkable example of what can be achieved when a garden incorporates its underlying geology and collaborates with the prevailing conditions. Fourteen years on, Mary's enthusiasm for her garden is undimmed. 'It's even lovely in winter – you just have to duck your head and get on with it!' Hugh O'Connell (01884 266188, [ukgardendesigner.com](http://ukgardendesigner.com)); Duchy of Cornwall Nursery (01208 872668, [duchyofcornwallnursery.co.uk](http://duchyofcornwallnursery.co.uk)).

For more coastal gardens, see [allaboutyou.com/homes](http://allaboutyou.com/homes)



\* Mary's favourite rock plants

**Low-growing phlox** (eg 'Red Admiral', 'Clouds of Perfume') are perfect for growing in small crevices.

**Creeping thymes** (eg *Thymus serpyllum* 'Coccineus') thrive in rocky situations.

**Erigeron karvinskianus**, sometimes known as the Spanish Daisy, will self-seed freely once established. Mary recommends cutting it back in June to encourage new growth.

**Origanum**, particularly the gold-leaved variety, *Origanum vulgare* 'Aureum'.

**Sea thrift** (*Armeria maritima*), a native wild flower that grows naturally in coastal situations.

