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BORN TO ROCK

Garden architect Peter Berg is king of the stone age, using boulders with brilliance in his designs

This contemporary garden combines modern detailing with rugged boundaries



LEFT The ipe deck leads to large basalt stepping stones and rock formations planted with *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Hameln', *Verbena bonariensis*, *Cornus* and *Euonymus alatus*
RIGHT The workings for the fish pond and pools, which are dressed in schist stone with cut-and-dressed basalt copings, are housed in a small garden building in the corner

"MUCH OF HIS WORK INVOLVES ROCKS THE SIZE OF SMALL CARS BEING CRANED OVER THE TOPS OF HOUSES"



Peter Berg founded his company Gartenlandschaft Berg & Co in Sinzig, Germany in 2000, with business partner Susanne Förster. A garden architect, he specialises in natural stonework and planting, and puts a great emphasis on building a strong team, training every employee himself.
www.gartenlandschaft.com

Many of us will have memories of rock gardens: probably in the gardens of parents or grandparents. Once upon a time, they were as essential a part of a garden as a decent terrace seems to be today. The idea was to display some delicate alpine plants in a setting similar to their native habitat – the reality was that, more often than not, they looked like a badly designed avalanche.

Much of the problem is the fact that a few broken paving stones and a scattering of easily liftable boulders doth not an alpine landscape make. In order to get that, you need vast, toe-crushing rocks and a decent sized crane. We saw that at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 2015 with Dan Pearson's masterful nod to the Peak district in his Chatsworth garden for Laurent Perrier.

However, to see it done regularly and with great panache, you need to scoot across the Channel to admire the work of landscape architect Peter Berg. Peter was brought up amongst mountains, more specifically the Eifel Region, where the Ardennes meet the Rhenish Massif with a great crash. Rock is in his genes – his grandfather was a quarryman – although

Peter spent his early life working for a casino before returning to the earth.

Basalt on the senses

This area's speciality is a grey basalt whose colour deepens in the rain and lightens to the colour of a pigeon's feather in the summertime, and it is this rock from which Peter makes many of his gardens. One of the great secrets of good rock work is to make sure that it looks as natural as possible, which means that you need to pay attention to the way that the strata and fissures run. If you go against it then it will always jar and look wrong. More than anybody, Peter knows how to read a rock face.

It is not just genetic – he has studied hard, looking in particular at the way that Japanese gardeners use rock. "I have been on workshops in Japan where you learn to think of a rock garden as an orchestra," he explains. "Each stone is an instrument and you are looking for a harmony that unites the stones and, equally importantly, the spaces in between." Peter tends to work from only very rough plans and attends to the detail during construction. If you think about it, it is really the only way. There →



“ALL OF PETER’S PATHS ARE EXCITING, REQUIRING A BIT OF NIMBLENESS AND CONCENTRATION”

would be little point in measuring every rock in the quarry and then laboriously drawing them into a plan – much more sensible to plot out the design quite roughly and then work, hands on, with the rocks as they arrive off the lorry.

Stone me

One recent garden he created in Machtum, Luxembourg, was relatively straightforward – at least it was in comparison to much of his work, which involves rocks the size of small cars being craned over the tops of houses (there is not much flat ground around this part of Luxembourg). The garden backs onto a vineyard – hence the long, beautifully spaced lines of vines stretching off to the horizon – but is in itself a relatively compact 500 sq m, with a modest level change of about 5m between the street and the back of the garden.

Peter began with a long path of stepping stones running up the side of the house from the street. “These are like Japanese stepping stones, but we use much bigger rocks to achieve the same effect,” he explains. All of Peter’s paths are exciting, requiring a bit of nimbleness and concentration as you climb – for those who want the easy way there is always an access through the house.

At the top of the steps you step out onto a generous hardwood deck overlooking a large drystone walled pool, which is home to a plethora of fish. The client loves his fish, and who can blame him? Lots of plumply satisfied Koi are always an asset – even though nobody should be under any illusions about how much kit is required to keep them alive. The necessary filters and pumps and ultra-violet gubbins is kept in an appropriately elegant green-roofed garden building with gracefully sliding doors.

Bigger & boulder

From the deck you climb again, and walk amongst rough boulders that serve to contain the planting and retain the soil at the rear. All these rocks are basalt carved from local quarries – there are about 240 tons of the things in this garden. →



It is an adaptable stone, and Peter has used a cut and dressed version to form crisply edged steps and coping stones for the pond walls. All this rock work has a secondary purpose – not only does it form the structure of the garden, but it also works to hold the planting in place and keeps maintenance down.

Peter has a rather charming view of the difference between English and German gardeners: “The English very much enjoy the process of gardening,” he says, “while my clients are too busy so would like to keep things as simple as possible.” To facilitate this, he keeps his palette very simple.

Once the stonework is complete Peter begins with carefully chosen trees and shrubs. He likes to work with the seasons, so, for example, trees are planted to make the most of autumn – in this garden there are *Liquidambar styraciflua*, *Acer palmatum* and *Parrotia persica*.

Around and amongst this arboreal skeleton, he plants a selection of grasses and perennials, usually in shades of blue or white. In this case, *Pennisetum alopecuroides*, *Nepeta* ‘Six Hills Giant’, lavender and some salvias are enough. Unlike a traditional English garden, where one is swept away by the sheer exuberant abundance of full-bosomed planting, Peter’s style is finely balanced. You need to see and appreciate not only the colours, but also the shapes of the supporting rocks.

Rocky road to success

All Peter’s gardens are built in-house. “I have two teams of six: one of landscapers to build the gardens and one of gardeners to maintain them afterwards.” Peter himself plants all the perennials and grasses (along with his gardeners). “This year I have been planting pretty solidly from April to August.”

FAR LEFT A path of stepping stones runs along the side of the house, shaded by *Carpinus betulus* ‘Fastigiata’ and planted with *Pennisetum* and *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Adagio’
ABOVE The boulders came from Natursteinwerk Reinhold. They graduate up the slope, helping to connect the garden with the vineyard and landscape beyond

The maintenance team goes back to every garden twice a year to cut back, tidy and to change over the perennials when necessary – as trees grow and the light changes, for example. “That is usually all they need,” says Peter, “although occasionally we send emails to clients suggesting that they water when the weather gets hot.”

It sounds like a pretty admirable way to run things, and Peter Berg certainly does some remarkable work. It is interesting to learn how different landscapes require different things from designers – we British can cope with rolling pasturelands and city courtyards, but would be challenged by the sort of slopes that are the everyday fare of Herr Berg. I have been lucky enough to see a few of his gardens, and am always stunned by the engineering and the finesse in which every boulder is placed – a Rock Meister par excellence. ○