

- Scouted garden
- Suggested story concept
- Directed photography
- Researched and wrote story

# STONE

## *Diaries*

With great determination – and sweat – Dawn and Bill Loney created their beautiful gardens, called Keppel Croft, from acres of boulders, cobblestones, gravel, limestone and granite.

BY JO CALVERT  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER YIP



## *Making a virtue of necessity:*

that's one of the things that Dawn and Bill Loney – like many great gardeners – do best. Their land lies just south of the Georgian Bay shoreline, near Wiarton, Ont., at the edge of the rocky Niagara Escarpment, so when they purchased it 30 years ago, they not only got a century house and a barn but also became the proud owners of a 76-acre gold mine of sorts. This yields a bottomless supply of boulders, cobblestones, gravel, slabs of limestone and shale, water-smoothed pebbles and rounds of granite.

Working with what their site offers up – and, Bill would hasten to add, a pickaxe – Dawn and Bill have created a series of distinctive, beautiful and endlessly interesting plots woven together with winding pathways. All the rock provides a perfect foil to the plants and adds colour, texture and a feeling of calm and permanence to the landscape. Scaled down, their great ways with rocks could do the same for a small backyard, even if you have to bring in the stone.



► Dappled sunlight plays onto the patio at the southeast corner of the house (above), a favourite spot for a lazy brunch or a late-afternoon game of cribbage. Outside the bordering stone wall, flowering bulbs fill a wide flowerbed in the spring.



▶ In a nod to Dawn's birthplace, an ancient Maori symbol drawn with granite cobblestones spirals out from the trunk of a Japanese walnut tree. Called *koru*, this frondlike shape represents the continuous unfolding of life. The thick sawdust mulch is renewed each spring.

## A Step-by-Step for Stony Soil

**1** With pickaxe and shovel, dig planting holes. Remove large rocks and soil, and set aside. To discourage weeds, cover surface between planting holes with thick layer of damp newspapers (Dawn and Bill also use recycled carpeting, laid face down), then top with sturdy, recycled plastic, cutting slits in covering to fold down into holes.

**2** Separate soil from smaller stones and gravel by sifting through ½-inch hardware cloth into wheelbarrow. Mix in compost, fibrous material (such as coir) and composted manure (Bill and Dawn add composted straw bedding and manure from their chickens, ducks, geese and sheep, and also recommend alfalfa pellets).

**3** Set plant in each hole, then backfill with amended soil and water thoroughly.

**4** Between plants, spread thick layer of mulch such as pea gravel, pebbles, crushed rock or brick.

**5** Position boulders, large rocks and/or driftwood where desired. Pack crevices with soil, then plant with alpines, dwarf conifers or creeping plants (such as sedum, sempervivum and thyme).

**6** Outline bed with large flat stones, set level with surface, to anchor covering and provide mowing guide.



➤ Winding between low-lying evergreens and hostas, and an aviary for canaries and finches, smooth stepping-stones are set, Japanese-style (above), so their surfaces are higher than the surrounding, sharp-edged pebbles. Flowering thyme – which releases its scent underfoot – spreads purple around the stones.

➤ A scree garden covers this island bed set in the lawn on the north side. Large limestone rocks anchor softly mounded earth planted with mat-forming thymes and dwarf evergreens.



## In the Xeriscape Garden

- ▶ Along the checkerboard walkway (top right), flat concrete pavers alternate with squares spread with river stone. Creeping sedum and thyme blur the straight edges.
- ▶ Nearby, a pathway of weathered flags set into the soil (above) curves around a gleaming clump of grass dotted with the bright magenta blooms of a neighbouring rose campion.
- ▶ Heavy boulders accentuate the delicacy of the flowers and stems of deceptively fragile-looking drought-tolerant plants.





➤ Boulders and broad slabs of stone step down the rock garden on a north-facing slope (above). Plants that range from creeping to spiky, woolly to smooth, and sharp to subtle in hue, combine with lichen-covered rocks and reflecting pools of rainwater to create a changing mosaic.

➤ Two drystone walls, built with slabs found on the spot, enclose a circular plot filled with fragrant lavenders and thymes. The original settlers' barn once stood here.

## GARDENERS' TRAVEL TIP

As Dawn and Bill's gardens grew, neighbours began helping out. An organic farm and garden, Keppel Croft also welcomes volunteers from WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms). More than 600 hosts in this international program offer an opportunity for cheap travel, education and hands-on experience in return for a little elbow grease. Learn more at [www.woof.ca](http://www.woof.ca) and [www.keppelcroft.com](http://www.keppelcroft.com).

## ON THE NET

Find instructions to make a soil and compost sieve at [www.canadianliving.com/july](http://www.canadianliving.com/july).

