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# How to Plant a Rock

by: Patsy Miller

## ALL ABOUT LANDSCAPE BOULDERS

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Actually, the February<sup>1</sup> Desert Awareness Committee/Cave Creek Recreation Department talk at the Cave Creek Town Hall was not really about planting rocks. What Robbie Goodroad of Goodroad Landscaping really spoke about was placing boulders. Boulders are frequently used as accents or focal points in desert landscaping, but the initial thought of dealing with hundreds of pounds of rock can be rather intimidating. Ms. Goodroad's talk provided good information on how to use boulders effectively in desert landscapes and was the source for this article.

photos: Dave Mills



Two types of boulders are available for landscaping in the Desert Foothills. Surface select granite boulders are rounded and come in shades of tan that harmonize with our decomposed granitic soils. As the name implies, these boulders are collected from the surface and may be embellished with moss, lichen, erosion marks or a patina of desert varnish. They vary in size from those easily picked up to those requiring a crane to move. Surface granite boulders are readily available at most

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<sup>1</sup> Article appeared in the Desert Advocate, July 2004



landscape supply centers, including Cave Creek's own Foothills Granite Supply. They cost between \$120 and \$240 per ton plus a charge for delivery.

Pit-run granite boulders are actually mined by blasting material out of a granite formation. They are blocky and angular with sharp edges. Their color will reflect the formation where they were mined and may not harmonize with local soil types. Some homeowners associations may not allow pit-run granite boulders. Mined boulders do not have moss or lichen embellishments, may not always be available and are more variable in price.

Buying boulders is a little like buying a car. There are many shapes, sizes and colors to choose from. The best choice is usually one that appeals to you, fits your budget and, in the case of boulders, one that fits the space for which it is intended.

One person can probably move a boulder that is about two basketballs in size; anything larger will require special equipment and additional muscle power. With some degree of effort, two people using a small dolly or wheelbarrow can move boulders that weigh 50 to 175 pounds. Rolling the



boulder out of the truck onto a dolly or into a wheelbarrow is much easier than picking it up off the ground. If the boulder is on the ground, it can be maneuvered into the wheelbarrow more easily by tipping the wheelbarrow on its side and moving one edge of the boulder at a time until it is mostly in the wheelbarrow. When the barrow is raised upright, hopefully the boulder will still be aboard. More than one attempt may be required before this maneuver is successfully completed.

Two to four men and a 1,000 pound dolly are needed to move boulders that weigh 200 to 600 pounds. It is easier to pull a dolly than to push it. Still larger boulders



require a crane and a skilled operator to move them into position. Often boulders are placed in a courtyard before the house framing is begun.

Boulders should not just be plopped on the ground. It takes a fair amount of thought and a good eye to make a boulder properly fit into a landscape. On a flat surface, one-third of a rounded boulder should be buried, with fill mounded up around its sides to make the boulder look like it is an integral part of the surface. Partially buried boulders should be grouped together rather than scattered around the yard. Even more pleasing to the eye is the creation of a mound, elevating one edge of each boulder where they abut each other in the center of the mound. Mounds should be about one foot high in the center and irregular in shape. Individual boulders appear larger if they are grouped together on a mound with voids between them filled with soil. But boulders should not be propped up or tilted on end to make them appear larger. Such an arrangement violates the concept that large objects must be in a natural state of repose, so the resulting grouping looks very artificial.

Boulders in association with irregularly shaped mounds are especially attractive when cacti are nestled into spaces between individual rocks and taller plants are positioned behind the grouping. Planting several individuals of the same species is recommended rather than just one each of many different species. The homeowner does have to exercise some restraint in landscaping with boulders. Some fortunate Desert Foothills neighborhoods come with a multitude of natural boulders. But if your area is devoid of boulders, an overabundance in one yard looks out of place.

If adding boulders to your landscaping still seems like a daunting undertaking (even after reading this wealth of information), a number of local landscapers are able to help you select and install your boulders in accordance with the principles outlined above.

