

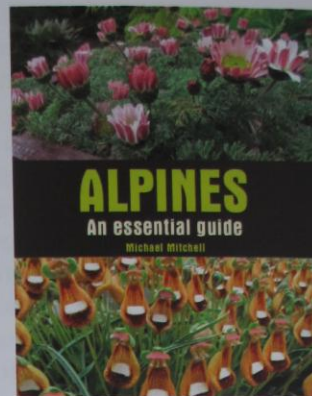
Alpines - An essential guide  
Michael Mitchell  
144 pages, 217 colour photographs  
ISBN 9781847972958  
Crowood Press £16

**H**ow 'essential' a book is it? This slim volume should not divert one from reading weightier tomes but does the author really capture the essentials in 144 pages? I believe he does ...

Seven logical sections start with an explanation of 'alpine' plant types. Mitchell describes very well the main characteristics and adaptations of true alpines and explains how the term covers a wider range of plants suitable for today's smaller gardens. I like the brief explanation of the binomial naming system and how learning Latin terms helps the grower to understand the plants' forms, uses and habitats. Chapter two covers the ways we have grown alpines, from the earliest rock gardens through troughs, alpine houses, frames and many others. It explains the sharp drainage required by many of these plants and how to adjust your soil or compost to suit. Practical hints cover everything from the types and quantities of rock to the differences between clay or plastic pots. This chapter itself covers most advice a beginner needs to make, plant and maintain a rock garden or start an alpine house collection.

The next chapter on 'Contemporary Settings' shows new ways to display alpine plants. Some present-day containers and decorative planting may not be to everyone's taste but I am pleased to see them here as they may introduce some people to the fascinating world of alpines. Interestingly, a couple of pictures show beds divided geometrically into rectangular planting pockets. I recollect that this was one of the first methods of growing alpines in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – nothing is new. The currently fashionable crevice style of rock garden is mentioned along with green alpine roofs and alpine lawns. Reading this chapter makes you realise that you may have unutilised space to exploit!

Chapter four covers planting and maintenance, in some cases reinforcing previous information – not a bad thing. Planning, ground preparation and labelling are included along with the best times of the year to establish the plants. General information on watering, feeding and cutting back is commonly sought by beginners or more experienced gardeners and is well covered here. The chapter finishes off with the twelve months of the year and their jobs that you may have to tackle. I am delighted to see this, as people often do not realize there are tasks and interest in the garden all year round and not just in spring and



summer. Chapter five is a really useful guide to propagating and gives sound practical advice on how to increase your stock. The author runs a nursery, *Slack Top Alpines*, so these pages are full of good practical advice and cover everything from seed sowing and simple division to mist propagation. The next chapter helps identify some of the main pests and diseases, with sensible ways to deal with them. I especially commend the approach of using chemicals extremely sparingly and only as a last resort.

An A to Z guide to alpines gives good coverage of plants that are mostly easy to obtain and suitable for a wide range of conditions. Suitability for sun or shade is indicated as are the plants that have the RHS Award of Garden Merit. Descriptions include the ultimate size of plants, often with details of their wild origins and the garden conditions that best suit them. To further help the novice, a chart of the seasons of the listed plants ensures twelve months of interest from the rock garden. A glossary helps beginners to understand any botanical and horticultural words new to them. Gardens to visit, suppliers and specialist societies in Europe, the USA and the UK are useful, albeit contemporary, additions.

I have for long struggled to make a single recommendation to beginners taking up alpines and rock gardening other than the *Collins Guide to Alpines and Rock Garden Plants* by Anna Griffith (1964). I am confident that this excellent new book will guide both beginner and novice in all aspects. Although we might all suggest additions to the alphabetical plant list, the author gives a good variety of plants that are available and of which he has personal experience; frankly, extensive plant lists may be found in many books or nursery catalogues and are less important than all the practical advice that Mitchell so generously gives in this new book. It is obviously written from years of practical experience and lives up to its title – it indeed covers all the essential information you will need when growing alpines. Buy it and rejoice.

*Ian Young*

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**K**elly Norris is a qualified horticulturist and plantsman from Iowa, 'one of the brightest young stars of American

