

NH's best crop

Mary Bingman
Littleton Garden Club

Robert Frost's poem: "mending wall" inspired me as a young child. I visualized meandering old stone walls on the edge of lush forests. He famously wrote: 'Good fences make good neighbors.' It took awhile to grasp all of the meanings.

Many readers debated the poem's references to nationalism, international borders, and immigration. My take included admiring nature and work shared between two rural neighbors. Abundant field rocks were vital in those beautiful walls.

Every time I weed my garden, large and small rocks appear in the soil.

Many are put aside for small stone edging walls. It reminds me of the fun saying: "rocks are *our best crop!*"

- **Stone Wall History**

The walls of old still serve a great purpose. New Hampshire stone walls melt into the landscape. We fly past them on our daily travels; we don't really see them anymore. In 1871 there were more than 250,000 miles of stonewalls throughout New England and New York. Most walls were built between 1810 and 1840. Many were constructed to contain sheep. Some farmers just needed clear crop fields and property boundaries visualized.

These walls in our winter woods represent a substantial wildlife habitat feature. There's shelter and cold food storage for critters. Nooks and crannies of stonewalls are fully-provisioned stores of acorns, beechnuts, maple, ash and birch seeds. Sometimes conifer cones are stored by mice, chipmunks and squirrels.

- **Plantings near Stone Walls**

Without blocking a view, a low stone wall can be a wonderful feature. Stone walls constructed of different shapes and sizes add texture and visual appeal. Walls can be adorned with containers of pretty annuals or herbs.

If plants are added near a stone wall we should select ones that thrive in USDA zone 4. Look to complement and promote the natural look. Choose perennials, shrubs, and flowers that add color and texture throughout our four seasons. Space material appropriately to allow growth. When planting on top of a stone wall, avoid overly aggressive plants like Creeping Jenny. Consider Creeping Phlox or Rock Cress instead with a good portion of ferns and spring blooming bulbs for interest.

- **Stone Wall Maintenance**

Mulch around the base of the wall to retain moisture and suppress weeds. Mulch adds a finished look to landscaping while protecting the base of the wall from erosion.

We were told to inspect our stone wall annually, particularly after severe weather. We look for signs of shifting, bulging, or cracking to avoid major damage. Problems require re-pointing loose mortar joints. Thankfully, the wall has not shifted or needed much mortar in the last decade.

- **Stone Wall Building**

Building a stone wall can be back breaking. It can also be a rewarding project that adds beauty and real value to a property. Boundaries are defined and the bigger landscape gains great visual appeal.

Patience and attention to detail are key throughout stone wall building. While it may be tempting to rush, taking time to select the right stones, ensure proper alignment, and allow mortar to cure fully will result in stronger, more attractive walls. With proper care and maintenance, stone walls can last for generations.

- **New Hampshire's Stone Walls**

We are fortunate to live near some breathtaking examples. A local trip from Littleton to Sugar Hill and back is always memorable when the "stone wall trip" is chosen.

If you are intrigued with locations of NH's stone walls- there's an interactive map set up by UNH.

NH's stone wall mapper : <https://granit.unh.edu/pages/nh-stone-walls>

You can also learn more about the rich history of stone walls here:

<https://nhdes.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=8d0b2ac3e3ac40f4b12ab958402d7f36>

- **Stone Masons and Stone Wall Artists**

Kevin Fife of Canterbury NH is an example of an artistic stone mason. He attended UNH, where he earned a degree in environmental conservation. He taught numerous workshops for organizations that include Canterbury Shaker Village and the NH Preservation Alliance.

Years ago, I stumbled upon the artwork of internationally known mason and artist: Andy Goldsworthy. It was another way to admire rocks and stones on a different scale. His 2002 DVD called "Rivers and Tides" is amazing and eye opening; a visual treat of his work. There is an online article about him that I'd recommend:

<https://www.afar.com/magazine/where-to-see-andy-goldsworthy-art>

- **Conclusion**

As spring unfolds, Daffodils pop up in front of ancient stone walls; a refreshing sight many anticipate.

Time to once again enjoy and admire "*our best crop*"!

The Littleton Garden Club is a fun and active group that is open to new members.

To learn more about our club and meetings go to: <https://www.littletonnhgardenclub.org/>