



A Bayern Munich soccer dwarf figure, center, stands in a showroom of Germany's Garden Gnom Park (Zwergen-Park) in Trusetal, Germany, April 22, 2018. Every year up to 100,000 tourists visit the Garden Gnome Theme Park with more than 2,500 garden gnomes. Jens Meyer - AP

HOMEPAGE

Don't be a landscape snob. Invite a gnome into your garden.

BY KENNETH SETZER
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Forget what you think you know about garden gnomes. And forget landscape snobbery. You probably need a garden gnome or two.

We may scoff at the garden gnome, but throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, such “garden follies” were extremely fashionable and included full-size cave and grotto replicas, re-creations of ancient Greek and Roman “ruins,” fake “ancient” monasteries or castles, and if the homeowner was wealthy enough, a live-in hired garden hermit to entertain visitors (I may be available as a part-time hermit, if anyone’s looking).

Gnomes are found throughout European folklore, and similar creatures by other names occur throughout human culture. But as a garden resident, the gnome is traced back to an English gardener. Sir Charles Isham, like so many Victorians, was an avid gardener and a great example of a 19th century British eccentric with too much time and money on his hands. In 1847 he decided to build a rockery adjacent to his home, [Lampport Hall](#), in the village of Lampport, England.

A rockery is essentially a rock garden, an assemblage of stones with soil among them for the growth of mostly alpine plants. A similar feature at Fairchild is the [Lougheed Spiny Forest of Madagascar](#), but instead of alpine plants, it hosts mostly plants of the dry forest of that island.

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A Madagascan take on an Alpine rockery — the Lin Lougheed Spiny Forest of Madagascar at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden.

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The Isham rockery, on a 24-foot-mound with rock towers, was designed as a miniature alpine landscape — “Mountain scenery on a reduced scale” — complete with dwarf conifers.

Isham was also a devoted spiritualist, and in addition to séances and contacting the dead, he was also apparently interested in the fairy world of the wee folk. He must have had gnomes in mind as ideal inhabitants of his mini mountain landscape.

Isham’s 1903 obituary in *The Garden* magazine mentions the rockery’s “caves and recesses with the fairy miners” in “strange association with the dwarf trees” with others appearing to be “on strike” from the mining work at hand. His *Oxford Biography* confirms his interest in “races of tiny beings,” an interest manifesting in “acquisition of hand-modelled tiny gnomes while on a visit to Nuremburg.”

Ceramic gnomes were already being produced in Germany, and still are in the town of [Graefenroda](#), which has a museum dedicated to them. There’s not much mention of them ornamenting the local gardens, but I recall my childhood German neighbors having one or two. After Isham’s rock garden became famous, the gnomes did too.



Garden gnomes are furtive and shy creatures, but can be coaxed into an occasional photo.

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Though normally temperate woodland creatures, gnomes adapt to subtropical gardens well. Keep in mind that many homeowners’ associations may frown upon gnomes, so keep them in the backyard or hidden beneath foliage. They like hunkering down among ferns. As long as the gnomes see your sincerity and love of nature, they will help keep things in order.

I hope this information provides you with an excuse to get your hands dirty, because if you adopt a gnome, you may want to consider building your own rockery for him/her, or even more appropriate, a fernery! If you need more encouragement, you can even visit the [Gnome Reserve](#) in Devon, U.K.

The classic red-capped and rosy-cheeked gnomes are industrious and diligent little gardeners who keep things neat and tidy, and I’m sure we can all use that kind of assistance in the garden. I highly recommend inviting a gnome or two into your landscape. And if anyone mocks you for it, remind them that you and your gnome are part of gardening history.

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