

By Jill Gleeson

Embellish Your Best

Using hardscapes to enhance your garden getaway

Whether providing a boundary, dividing your property from your neighbor's or navigating guests through your yard, hardscapes can add a lot to your garden. Not familiar with the term? Simply put, a hardscape is any element in your garden that isn't alive. In other words, says Joanne Kostecky, president of the American Nursery and Landscape Association, "Hardscape [provides] the architectural bones to a landscape. Although there are many gardens with just plants and beds, the best gardens or landscapes are enhanced by the architecture of the space."

No matter the function, hardscapes need to be effectively integrated into your garden. Here are a few helpful guidelines from some local landscape experts.

Fences

Gone are the days of your granddaddy's chain link fence. Today's landscape architects—and savvy homeowners—recognize that fences do a lot more than give a sense of enclosure to your property. According to James van Sweden of Oehme, van Sweden and Associates, Washington, D.C., fences add "quite a sculptural element in the landscape. Think of the white-painted fences in the countryside around Middleburg, Va. They are a very beautiful part of the landscape."

The first step in deciding which fence is right for your outdoor space is to identify what the fence's function will be and determining the feel you'd like your garden to have. "Fences can be transparent or opaque," says Claire Bedat of the Landscape Architecture Bureau, Washington, D.C. "The opaque fence will define a boundary and create privacy, whereas the transparent will have a semi-private feeling where you extend the garden lines outside." An opaque fence (a masonry wall, for example) can be used to totally obscure unwanted views and create an intimate outdoor room or even the much-heralded secret garden. A transparent fence is useful when "borrowing scenery," a landscape design technique in which a pleasing view from outside of the garden is kept accessible, and even enhanced, by the garden's design.

Once you've decided what purpose your fence will serve, it's time to determine what it should look like. Study your property from the inside and the outside for clues on what style might best suit. Van Sweden, author of *Architecture in the Garden* and landscaper for a number of high-profile clients (including Oprah Winfrey, for whom he designed a \$9 million landscape that took four years to construct), says homeowners should "go out and look at fences in their community. See what appeals to you; decide what you like!" Bedat stresses, "you need to be in harmony with the architecture of your house, because the garden is an extension of your home. If the fence becomes isolated from the house it serves, it looks awkward."

Lighting

If the last time you thought about outdoor lighting was when the porch bulb burned out, it's time to explore al fresco illumination. According to Steven Mackler, of TLG Design/Build (The Landscape Group) in Washington, D.C., at it's most basic, lighting can be "directional, making sure you get from point A to point B at night. But it can also be purposeful in terms of accenting the critical features the designer wishes to focus on,

or showcasing the house.” So, instead of merely marking that path from the sidewalk to the front door, creative homeowners could highlight a tree they find especially lovely, or a group of flowering shrubs, or a garden sculpture.

Once you choose a feature of the landscape you would like to illuminate, you can light it in several ways. “Up lighting is sort of the nighttime equivalent of the daytime statue feature,” says Martha Donnelly, Martha Donnelly and Associates, in Bethesda, Md. “It gives you something to look at. Another value of up lighting something close to the edge of your property is that it helps mask what’s beyond it.” So, if there is something unattractive in your neighbor’s yard, up lighting can help it fade into the cover of darkness. Want an even more striking effect? Try back lighting; according to Donnelly, this technique “will give a very dramatic outline of the shape of what you are lighting.” No matter which effect you choose, Donnelly cautions, “you should not be able to see the source of that light. There should be something—perhaps shrubbery—that disguises it.” As crucial as directional (or task lighting, as it is also known), and accent lighting are to the well-designed landscape, so too is ambient lighting. Mackler, who has been featured on HGTV’s *Dream Builders*, says, “Ambient lighting gives an aura to the garden. It’s responsible for the overall feel of the garden at night.” If you are striving for a natural look, try down lighting a mature tree. The dappled appearance of the leaves will have, “a very nice moonlit effect,” says Donnelly. Looking for a night under the stars? Use candles or entwine tree branches with strings of miniature white bulbs to create a starlit appearance.

Pathways

Sidewalks, walkways and pathways can do a lot more than lead visitors from the street to your front door. They can lend structure to your garden, too. According to Cynthia Ferranto, of Cynthia Ferranto Landscape Design, Washington, D.C., “A walkway can be used as an organizing feature for a woodland, vegetable or perennial garden. Use the walkway to organize your plantings along the line of the pathway. Kids have great fun with pathways and always seek them out.”

The primary pathway leading to your front door, or from the back door to the garage should be “smooth, wide and not slippery in the winter,” says Cheryl Corson of Cheryl Corson Design, Upper Marlboro, Md. After all, who wants to be slipping and tripping over an uneven, slick walk while toting big bags of groceries? That’s why brick, flagstone and concrete pavers are such ideal materials for primary pathways. But with smaller garden trails you can start to be more creative.

“Your choice of materials is going to give your visitors a clue about how quickly they should move through the space,” says Corson. “If you have a little secret garden around the side, you may want to place oversized stepping stones at an interval that forces you to walk more slowly.” In other words, people using this path will be required to take a more leisurely stroll—stopping to smell the roses. Loose fill materials are also ideal for this purpose. “There are many, many kinds of aggregates, like pea gravel. Recycled glass is also wonderful! It’s tumbled, so it’s not sharp or dangerous. That’s a good example of a loose fill pathway that would slow you down, be functional and yet decorative at the same time,” says Corson. She adds that while secondary garden paths can be small, perhaps just two feet across, primary walks should allow two people to walk side by side: “the rule of thumb is they should be at least four feet wide,” she says.

Water

There are a myriad of benefits to incorporating ponds, pools and waterfalls into your landscape. “I like the lovely sound water features provide,” says Ferranto. “And they also add movement. When you’re in an urban environment, the water’s movement really brings life to a garden, and it can certainly create a strong focal point!” Adds van Sweden, “Lily pools in particular are wonderful. They bring nature and wildlife into garden, such as fish and frogs, and you can grow beautiful plants in the water, like lotuses and lilies.”

Bedat suggests that when choosing the ideal spot for your water feature, you need to decide if you want to “hide or reveal it.” If you choose to hide it, consider making the feature the focal point of an enclosed section of your property (perhaps a secret garden), which is accessible by a pathway. The “surprise” discovery of the pond, fountain or waterfall will only heighten its charm and impact. If you decide to reveal the water feature, says Bedat, “You should be able to peek at it from inside your home. It should be framed by the windows, or doors—by the architecture of the house itself.”

While a waterfall is dramatic, there are a few elements that must be in place before you make this step. “If your property doesn’t have a falling grade, to impose one is a real mistake,” says Ferranto. “If it goes against the grade it often looks fake, like it didn’t evolve from the site.” For homeowners with level property, alternatives include a fountain, which creates the same soothing sound, or a waterwall, which “is more formal than a waterfall, but would make more sense because it is more of a freestanding element,” explains Ferranto

No matter what kind of water feature you go for, remember: bigger is better. “Try to err on the large side,” says Ferranto. “Water features are often done too small. It’s really going to have a much more interesting impact if it’s large.”

Art

Okay, admit it: You have a gnome in your garden, don’t you? Or maybe pink flamingos—or a gazing ball, flags, signs, statuary...decorating your landscape can become addictive. It’s fun, relatively inexpensive, and even the least handy of us feels capable of plunking a plaster frog figurine down next to the rose bush. But a decorative feature can actually serve multiple purposes if it’s also used to distract from an unwanted view. Suppose, for example, your neighbor has the dreaded “eyesore” property, so you erect something to screen that unattractive view. That’s fine, says Donnelly, “But if that screening is done in conjunction with creating something attractive to focus on in your own space, the screening doesn’t have to serve the dual purpose of being both a barrier and something attractive to look at.”

Do you have a larger piece of sculpture you’re dying to show off? Use it as a focal point. Says van Sweden, “If you put it to the side of your property, it defines the boundary. Or, you can place it an axis to the front door, where it would define and divide space, and create mystery. Sculpture can create vistas—it pulls your eye into the garden, and it gives scale to the garden as well.”

Many designers also use architectural salvage in their landscape projects. Rescued from demolished building, these pieces prove that one man’s trash is another man’s treasure. Says van Sweden, “These elements can be very beautiful if they’re isolated and placed in

the right spot.” Decorative stone features retrieved from destroyed structures can be converted into fountains, benches, even a sculpture in and of itself.

Every choice makes an impact

Just how important is hardscape to the well-designed landscape? According to Kostecky, “Hardscapes are the first thing to be put on the designer’s paper or computer after the base map of existing site conditions.” Even if you aren’t ready to invest in a hardscape project for your entire property, tacking just one element of hardscape can make an immense difference in the appearance and feel of your yard. As Kostecky says, “It is the architecture of the design that makes gardens beautiful.”

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