



Granite treads installed with pebbled-finish concrete make this steep grade change smoothly while adding character to the garden.

*Choosing the best materials for a hardscape project takes careful consideration. But with so many options, the possibilities are boundless.*

# Walking the HARD LINE

**W**hen I started in the green industry as a gardener, my primary attention was on the plants. It took years for the hardscape to come into focus as a complementary part of the landscape. With all the excitement going on with the trees, shrubs, perennials and seasonal plants, the hard features were left unappreciated. As time passed, I began to look at the hardscape — to really see it. I found my eyes distracted by bad hardscape features that were in disrepair or built with inappropriate materials. Conversely, I felt drawn to those features that were built nicely and illustrated using materials well-suited to the design and the environment.

There is a perpetual love affair in the green industry with the newest plant, along with tireless efforts to improve the industry's horticultural integrity. This same romance does not seem to exist with hardscape materials, or if it does, I have missed it. My experience indicates changes to the materials used in the construction of hardscape features are slow to be accepted. This is true for several reasons. With individual plant material changes, the risk and commitment is low. A new species can be tried, and if it fails, it can be replaced. Even for a good-size tree, removal is not all that daunting if it doesn't work in the landscape. Additionally, plant variances within a genus or species generally are small, so the shift in design also is small. Even with new plant material choices, the installation technique remains the same, making it a low-risk change.

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A pool garden mixes traditional bluestone, fieldstone and extruded steel for the fencing to create an inviting setting.

When making changes in the materials used for the construction of a hardscape feature, however, a great deal of commitment and financial risk is assumed. Construction methods may need to be altered completely to accommodate the new material. If the feature fails, the repair work could be so daunting that it is not worth

the effort. In the interest of successful projects and smooth construction, the familiar materials are often the simplest to work with, and the results, though conservative, are more predictable.

**The hard of the matter.** As the landscape industry grows, so does the com-

petition. Having a broad repertoire of materials helps set businesses apart from one another. Most hardscape materials lend themselves to projects of varied sizes. Starting out with a small installation project may be the confidence builder needed to assimilate a new material into the business offerings. Experimenting with newer materials and the plants that are complementary to those materials can increase sales and further solidify business goals. After a few projects successfully are sold and constructed, the risk will drop, and the product mix available to clients will be enriched because you took a chance on something new.



An aged brick patio gets a modern boost by the addition of a large, composite deck with white trim. The pergola, constructed of cedar, gets a two-tone finish to match.

A woodland setting becomes a wonderfully inviting landscape by adding a concrete paver patio installed in two patterns and blending two warm colors.



**Understanding structure.** Underneath all the plants in the landscape is a skeletal frame that acts as a support structure for the entire site. This structure comprises the topography of the land — the hills and valleys, the flat expanses and ledge outcroppings — followed by any large trees that may exist. Next in a residential landscape are the house and its placement on the land, followed by any outbuildings.

It also is worth the effort to notice the surrounding landscape and borrowed views in determining the underlying structure of the landscape. Within this outlined structure, the stage is set for the potential



This segmented retaining wall was installed to replace a failing railroad tie wall. Granite switchback steps with paver landings were used to break up the steep grade change.



The Montauk black slate patio blends successfully with a quartzite sitting wall and granite step, creating a stunning sitting area.

hard features that, once incorporated, provide function to the landscape.

Finished hardscape features are read in the landscape on either the vertical or horizontal plane. Vertical features include walls, fences, posts and trellises. Features in the horizontal plane are on the ground, like driveways, walks, patios and paths. Arbors, pergolas, decks, porches, stoops and steps offer a horizontal feature that is up off the ground along with vertical interest. The height and span of the feature determines which plane is more visually dominant. Boulders have a valuable use in the landscape, and depending on their height and girth, they also provide both

vertical and horizontal interest. (Water features are a unique blend of hardscape and water, making them somewhat more complex than the other listed features, so I will not address them at this time.) The important message: How a feature communicates with the underlying structure is very important to the design.

- If the land is steep, a wall can be the perfect solution to create a flat terrace space. These two vertical elements communicate in similar directions.
- If the land is very flat, a wall may be added to break up the expanse and offer a vertical feature where there only had been a horizontal one.

- If there is a ledge outcropping jutting out on the land, a patio could be cut right into the sides in order to meld the natural with the constructed. The horizontal patio feature now blends and merges with the vertical plane of the ledge.

**The rustic-to-formal design continuum.** To help guide the design choices, it can be said that there is a continuum along which landscape styles and the hard features built to complement them are measured. On one end, there is the rustic landscape, which deviates as little as possible from the natural world to make it habitable for humans. On the other end is the formal, manicured landscape, which is so tended by humans that only a brief moment of neglect can set the delicate balance off kilter. The hardscape features utilized along this continuum of styles need to make sense and fit with the host environment.

Neither end of this continuum is better or preferable, nor are any of the stops along the way better than another. It is the ability to define the setting that already exists, design the hard features that provide function and then choose materials that best fit the overall preferred aesthetic.

**Hardscape materials.** The material used to build a hardscape feature is as important as the design and placement of that feature in the landscape. For a client, the value of any given feature will be not only its beauty, but also its longevity. Anyone can ask for a fence, but all fence styles do not fit every setting. It is a challenge to determine which material best suits the environment, the overall aesthetic and the budget. To skip this phase of planning with the client is to miss a valuable construction opportunity. Oftentimes the client has a preconceived notion about his or her preferred materials. As landscape professionals and suppliers, it is our job to educate clients about the diversity of construction materials and their varied uses. It also is important to steer clients away from choices that are inappropriate for their site. Just as we would guide them away from planting lilacs in a shady and acidic site, we also should steer them away from installing a wood fence if the land is wet.

Where any given material sits on the rustic-to-formal design continuum is linked directly to its application within the landscape. While some materials tend toward the more rustic, such as a rough hewn wood fence, and others toward the more formal, like a white picket fence, each material can travel from one

## Material world

Some are homey and rustic. Some are manicured and formal. And some can wear many hats. Depending on where and how they're utilized, hardscape materials can dress up the landscape in any desired style.

- Concrete pavers used in a traditional style and pattern provide a crisp, formal element.
- Concrete pavers that have been tumbled and installed in a random pattern in a woodland setting feel closer to the rustic end of the continuum.
- Concrete pavers that are mixed in boldly different colors and patterns excite the design, regardless of the setting.
- Brick — whether sharp and smooth or porous and rough — harkens back to the Colonial Era and can be anywhere from formal to rustic.
- Granite, saw-cut and somewhat polished, fits into a manicured landscape.
- Granite that is rough-cut, given a rock edge and heat-treated communicates antiquity.
- Cobblestones with their rough irregularity always provide a somewhat rustic tone.
- Wood fences, rough hewn and left to weather in the elements, feel like part of the natural setting.
- Wood fences, cleanly sanded to a splinter-free softness and painted white, fit into a more cultured look.
- Composite decking has the versatility of working in any setting you can imagine — especially in rustic settings because these often are the wetter places that will rot wood more swiftly.
- Cellular PVC is new to the landscape trade, but brings hope for all those wet and potentially moldy locations that rot wood. Think latticework, fencing, deck skirts, even arbors and pergolas for growing plants.
- Bluestone with surface impurities eliminated, sharply cut and selected for consistent, blue-gray color neatly fits formal applications.
- Bluestone, tumbled to tone down its edges, offers a softer, less rigid look.
- Bluestone used in varied colorations and with the natural cleft maintained creates an even more rugged look.
- Fieldstone as a stepping stone path or patio is always an informal choice in any setting.
- Fieldstone, round and aged, makes the perfect material for a New England wall that looks like it has been in the landscape forever.
- Concrete wall block can be anywhere from rustic to formal now that it is available in a wide range of colors, styles and finishes.
- Stamped concrete used as a pool decking enlivens the scene with intricate patterns and colors while simultaneously assuring a surface with longevity.
- Processed stone, such as three-eighths-inch bluestone, makes the perfect rustic garden pathway or drip edge.
- River stones, whether using three-eighths-inch thickness for the base of a play set or 3-inch stones to create a drainage swale, offer a beautifully manicured look.



An urban landscape shines with a brick patio and segmented retaining walls capped in pigmented concrete. This traditional arbor, constructed of cedar with cellular PVC posts, blends beautifully with the dark green lattice installed for screening.



A natural fieldstone wall with granite steps creates a terrace on a flat grade. The picket fence adds a rustic touch to this well-organized hardscape.

end of the continuum to the other to some degree depending on how it is used (sidebar, above).

The simplest materials to imagine working with are those that are closest to nature — stone, wood and metal (wrought iron). These materials echo our ancestral memories and conjure images of gardens, such as Versailles in France, Villa d'Este in Italy and the Stourhead estate in Stourton, England, where the materials were stylized and used in grand and timeless ways. Many people still think romantically about these gardens and fantasize about using these same classic materials (albeit on smaller scales) on their properties.

**Choosing hardscape materials.** Over time, the hardscape materials used in gardens have crept (and sometimes leapt) forward in substance and in style. Materials like brick are being used in more and more ways, and it is hard to believe such

common usages were once new-fangled ideas. Today, among a widening variety of materials, we have concrete pavers, concrete segmented retaining wall blocks, stamped and colored concrete options, composite decking, vinyl and aluminum fencing and cellular PVC lumber. While these manmade materials sometimes are cheaper, they can be more expensive, depending on a variety of factors. Price, however, is never the best reason to choose a material. What is important to realize is the list of material choices now is so long and varied that to dismiss something unfamiliar — just because it is unfamiliar — without considering the options, is to miss a great design opportunity.

It always seems easier to choose materials by eliminating those you don't like. This can be dangerous, however, because some new material may be the absolute perfect choice for a certain hardscape feature in a particular setting. It is true

that unfamiliar materials might seem uninteresting at first or that having seen one used poorly unduly may influence our decisions. A word to the wise and the creative: Give different materials a chance before deciding against them. Or learn the hard way.

For example, I never considered using anything but wood for a deck, and I was adamant about it. Now, as my aging mahogany deck is in need of its third refinishing in eight years, I am more inclined to consider composite decking in the future. Yes, it can be more expensive than some other deck choices, but over time, it will be less costly in follow-up care.

The practice of mixing and matching hardscape materials delightfully can

Formal application of concrete pavers is used in two colors, mixed with granite steps. Fiberglass planters are set to stay outside and be filled with plants year-round.



A traditional cut of bluestone is installed using two tones of stone in a random pattern. This hardscape application fits into a rustic setting with angular cuts and boulders mixed with granite steps and a stained mahogany deck.

enliven a design and give any project an original touch. Choose complementary materials to construct one or more projects.

- Dare to mix granite steps with a paver patio.
- Be brave by adding a cobblestone border to the edge of a bluestone walk or a gravel driveway.
- Stretch the envelope by using wood railings and balusters with a composite deck to get the best of both worlds.

The idea is to get strong detail out of your hardscape features so that when plants around them have matured, the hardscape still will retain a strong and graceful presence in the overall design. Be careful not to select every single material

you like for the same project, even if making choices is hard. Too much variety creates a busy landscape with no cohesion. Pick your favorites, mix them together, and then be sure to repeat those materials around the property. Remember that repeated uses of materials (alone or in good combinations) gives a feeling of flow within the landscape.

- If cobblestones are selected as a border to the front walk, try to repeat their use as a border on the driveway or as an apron along the garage opening or street edge.
- Make the back patio the same paver style as the front walk, but set it in a different pattern, and add a different color border.

- Use the lattice topper from your fencing in lattice panels along the house for growing vines or to screen air-conditioning units.

Again, these hardscape materials used in multiple applications solidify the overall design.

While many hardscape features stand out in the landscape, there will be situations where you want the hardscape to fade into the background, and the material you choose is key to achieving its “disappearance.” Be aware that a white fence around a small yard always is seen distinctly and, by its nature, is a large part of the landscape aesthetic. On the other hand, a cedar fence allowed to weather to a soft gray recedes quietly, becoming a backdrop to more prominent features. A black, chain link fence will fade almost entirely into the landscape, especially with well-chosen plants installed to obscure the posts. This careful attention in choosing materials by considering the final effect will serve you every time.

Ask your clients some key questions in order to guide them in their selection of materials. These simple questions will help make decisions:

Will they use this feature year-round?

Should this feature be a focal point in the landscape?

What is the maintenance requirement for this hardscape feature?

Here are some examples:

- A client may request natural fieldstone in the front walk, but the irregular, fissured nature of fieldstone makes for an uneven walking surface. A better choice would be bluestone in a mix of tints to give the rustic coloration desired while maintaining a safer walking surface.
- While it is a more expensive option, selecting a fence that mixes a picket topper with a board fence base could provide the best of both worlds —



In this small, suburban back yard surrounded by a white cedar fence, space is limited. This patio design uses angular bluestone that seamlessly abuts the lawn so children easily can overlap play from one element to the other.

Built in the Cape style, this carriage house receives a fitting hardscape of jumbo cobble aprons and edging to surround a crushed bank driveway.



Even the most simple hardscape features, like a granite lamppost and serpentine gravel drive, serve as anchors along with the tree structures in this fall setting.



some privacy along with a feeling of openness.

- Decide to install a segmented retaining wall to hold back a steep slope that the client hoped to eliminate because a segmented wall is the most cost-effective and safe way to retain a great deal of earth. Unlike landscape timbers, this choice needs little to no follow-up care.

Maintaining a diverse set of material options for your clients, whether on the supply or installation side of the business, provides a much-needed service to landscape industry clientele. It practically is impossible for the end user of these materials to understand all the work and planning that goes into the construction of a patio or wall. For landscape designers, contractors and suppliers, it is imperative we understand these factors and educate our clients one by one about the wide variety of choices that exist in landscape materials. The level of industry professionalism perceived by the client will be elevated when solid reasons — the pros and cons — for choosing or discarding a material are presented clearly. Furthermore, if you stress the importance of matching materials to climates, uses and budgets, clients have better frameworks within which to make decisions — so beautiful hardscape features can be designed, built and enjoyed for a long time.

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