

Down the Garden Path

By Susan Camp

A well-landscaped garden or yard provides pleasure for the eyes and peace for the spirit. Landscaping can increase property value and improve the quality of the environment. The Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Virginia Gardener brochure “The Value of Landscaping” presents many benefits of landscaping. The basis of landscaping is development of the hardscape, or structures and pathways that form the skeleton of the garden. Once the bones are in place, trees, shrubs, flowering plants, and turf will form the body of the landscape.

Pathways are an integral part of the hardscape as they provide direction, leading one, not just to the front door, but to a prized rose bed or garden bench tucked into a shady spot. On our property, the main garden paths are composed of bricks and the side paths, which have been removed, were made of oyster shells. Unfortunately, the brick paths have sunk in places, as they were laid in sand beds without a gravel base. The sand has shifted and washed away over the years, leaving low spots that hold water. Replacement of our septic system several years ago contributed to the changes in the pathway. Since we decided to redesign the entire garden, the paths have to be fixed. They will not be moved, just improved.

Research on the topic of laying brick pathways has been an eye-opener for both my husband and me. Our first impulse was to repair the pathways ourselves. Gardening books offer plans that range from post-modern severe to colonial symmetrical to English cottage garden whimsical. Millions of articles and photographs exist online, as well as YouTube videos that demonstrate how to design, prepare, and lay a path out of any material imaginable.

I became exhausted just watching a few of the videos. At this point, my husband and I had to decide if our time, energy, and lack of path-laying experience made this do-it-yourself project worthwhile. We hired someone to do it. With the responsibility of building the hardscape lifted, we can focus on other aspects of the new garden, while maintaining the rest of the property.

If you decide to make pathway or other hardscape repairs or changes, first check the local ordinances and the Chesapeake Bay Protection Act online at www.co.gloucester.va.us to affirm that you are in compliance with the laws. There are permeable paving products on the market, composed of a variety of environmentally safe materials, which will help prevent runoff from entering the waterways and contributing to pollution.

Match your paving materials with your terrain and garden and the style and colors of your home. Choose a paving pattern that is not so busy that it will overwhelm the house and garden. A current trend on television and online seems to be huge expanses of paving in the form of walkways and terraces. Consider how you will use the garden paths and other paved areas. Too much stone or brick can heat up the surrounding area in summer and contribute to undesirable runoff into creeks and rivers.

If you lack experience in laying pathways, recognize that it could turn into an exhausting, back-breaking job that may not turn out exactly as you imagine. If you decide to hire someone, ask for references and hire a reputable landscaper or mason. The price will not be cheap. Even if you hire a professional, lay a section of the pattern out on the driveway to be sure you like it.

The goal is to develop the bones of your yard or garden in a way that will provide you with years of pleasure and beauty requiring minimal maintenance, as well as freedom from worry about negative effects on the environment.

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