

Gardening / Paving the way

Path planning and other ways of organizing a garden

BY SALLY CUNNINGHAM



Used bricks and stones (also shown on following page) add weathered beauty to the hardscape.

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One feature that makes a garden pleasing, both aesthetically and practically, is a path through it. Paths tell visitors where to walk, direct them to the important places, and keep them off the garden soil, plants, or grass. If placed well, they break up space and define areas. And they keep shoes dry and high heels out of wet soil after the rain. Paths are good things.

Where do you have a path in your yard, and is it doing the job you want? If you need a path, how should you position it, and what materials should you use to make it? The study of paths warrants considerable training for professionals in conferences like the National Hardscape Expo or Plant WNY's yearly educational summit, but regular people can make good decisions about paths with a few guidelines.

Planning a path

Primary paths are usually the widest and straightest. They follow function: there needs to be a clear way from the front door to the driveway or mailbox, from the kitchen to the garden and compost pile, from the patio to the perennial border or picnic table. The width depends on the use and how many people need to use the path at the same time.

If you'll use a wheelbarrow or wheelchair, a path may need to be more than four feet wide, with wider areas for making turns or turning around.

- If the path leads guests from cars or the street to a front door, it should also be three or four feet, allowing more than one person to walk comfortably.
- Paths should be in proportion to the size of the house: A two-foot front walk to the front steps of a mansion looks dinky; a four-foot wide path approaching a small Cape Cod cottage appears overly formal and dominant.



Secondary paths

Other sorts of paths are narrower—secondary—and have different purposes. For a gardener to have access to work in and around the garden, a twenty-inch path might suffice; if a garden cart or other equipment needs to pass there, then make it three feet. There should be a two-foot gravel covered path or space behind all so-called “foundation beds” around houses. That path around the foundation allows access to windows, siding, and baseboards as well as the plants.

The fun part, where creativity comes in, is planning a secondary path that enhances the garden experience. How should people be able to move through your space? What should they see when they approach the yard? From what vantage point and in what order? In Garden Walk Buffalo and Open Gardens of our region, many gardeners have strategized the movements of visitors, using paths to lead people to enter one way (say, through a gate next to the garage) and to arrive at the gazebo or flower bed, and to exit the yard another way. The garden and what’s in it influence the path, and the path influences how the garden is viewed—but there must be conscious planning to make it effective.

Even more fun is using a path to surprise people. A path can take a turn so that—voila!—suddenly, there’s a marble statue, a whimsical playhouse, or a shaded sitting area. The unveiling is so much more memorable than if there’s straight line to a visible statue or bench. Another surprise can come from a path to ... nowhere, which can lead to an apparent door in the fence—but there is no opening! Such fooled-you moments make garden visits memorable.



Paths of many materials

Different materials suit different purposes and are compatible with various house and neighborhood styles and character. Barn boards or straw paths work in a country garden, but may not belong in a Lancaster Avenue front yard. Nor do stamped pavers enhance a Victorian mansion. Choose the kind of path that works for your home and your uses.

A grassy path

Increasingly, gardeners plant flower and shrub beds, sometimes around trees in the front yard rather than maintaining an expansive lawn. Mowed grass makes an attractive path around those beds. In the country, just mowing a path through a field makes walking easier

and benefits some wildflowers. Even dogs tend to follow a mowed path—literally the path of least resistance—when it is provided in a field.

A mulched path

In a casual yard, shredded bark mulch (or even sawdust or straw) can do the job. Don't just pile the material on top of the soil or lawn though. Do dig a trench as wide as you wish, and make it several inches deep. Then line it with cardboard and newspaper* and spread the mulch material on top of that. It's cheap and easy to do this compared to making more permanent pathways. The downside of a mulched path is that it's messier than solid surfaces when wet and it decomposes over time.

Gravel or pea-gravel

Gravel, also called crushed gravel or crushed stone, provides a foundation for paths, sidewalks, and patios. It is irregular and may have sharp pieces that are easy to tamp into a solid foundation. Pea gravel is round, with roughly three-eighths-inch pieces, available in several tones and colors. Many paths are made of flagstones surrounded by pea gravel. Gernatt Asphalt (Gernatt.com) is a local company (often seen at the Plantasia landscape show in March) that provides information on all gravel, pea gravel, and sand products.

Solid stone paths: flagstone, brick, and pavers

Some experts attribute the flag in flagstone to an Old Norse word, *flagga*, meaning slab. The term can refer to many sizes of flat stones, derived from sedimentary rock. Depending upon the elements in the rock, flagstones come in many colors.

Bricks are made of clay that is shaped and baked. For some homes, it's the classic choice for paths, steps, and walls. Experienced Bricks is a local company that salvages and repurposes bricks; many buyers like the irregularities and patina the old bricks offer.

Pavers can be natural or manmade. Pavers carved from real stone are sometimes preferred for the natural variations in tone and texture. Manmade pavers are formed by pouring concrete into molds and using dye and texturizing techniques to create many different looks. Companies such as Unilock have transformed the hardscape portion of the landscape industry over the past few decades, offering a wide range of choices.

There are so many variables here. Built well, paths can add beauty and define landscape design. They can also add quality to outdoor living and make walking through yards safe and enjoyable. Do your homework; talk with professionals. Then plan a path that will serve you well for a long time.

Tips for designing your best path

- A straight path suggests formality, with a purpose of getting from A to B.
 - A curved path is more casual, suggestive of leisurely strolls to enjoy a garden.
 - Tight curves or scallops are distracting, even annoying—especially for those who mow the lawn. Design long, sweeping curves instead.
 - Paths need edges; nothing makes the impression of neatness faster more emphatically than a clean edge.
 - Make it wide enough. It's difficult to make it wider after it's built, but you can always narrow a path by letting plants drape along the edges.
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