

With the start of the spring gardening season just around the corner, now is an excellent time to begin planning changes or additions to your garden and landscape. Sometimes, however it is hard to get inspired when very little is in bloom. One way to start that spark is to consider hardscape materials.

Gardening is said to be the second fastest growing past time in America, coming in just behind NASCAR racing believe it or not. As this interest in gardening develops, Americans find themselves searching for new and interesting elements to improve their landscapes. One popular trend is to incorporate hardscape materials into gardens. Hardscape is any non-living element added to the landscape for the purpose of improving it esthetically or functionally or both.

Most gardens and landscapes have some type of sidewalk, patio and/or retaining wall as an element. At one time the materials available to create these elements were limited to concrete, brick and occasionally natural stone. Brick and stone were more costly materials and concrete provided limited flexibility and interest. Today the materials available for use in hardscaping have increased dramatically and have become far more affordable.

Concrete no longer has to be a boring gray slab or a cinder block. Scoring and coloring technologies make it possible for concrete to have the appearance of stone, brick or even cultured stones. It has also been used to create pavers that have the appearance of cobblestones and bricks at a fraction of the price of the original material it mimics. Concrete is also used to create decoratively shaped and colored, interlocking blocks for use in retaining walls.

While brick and natural stone remain more costly choices, advances in technology and transportation have kept prices down while at the same time increasing the availability and choices of these materials.

Using natural stone in the garden is a very popular landscaping trend. Some common uses of rock and stone include taking advantage of natural rock outcroppings to highlight plantings or other features, incorporating boulders for added interest, or using it to create patios and retaining walls.

The natural stone choices for use in retaining or decorative walls are nearly limitless. Depending on your color, size and shape preferences, there is a natural stone to suit your needs.

For patios and sidewalks the two most popular natural stones used in the Central Virginia area are bluestone and soapstone. Bluestone is an imported stone, while soapstone is generally obtained locally in the area of Alberene. Bluestone is variable in color, ranging from a light grey, to dark blue, to nearly purple. Soapstone on the other hand tends toward light grey and blue-green. Both are beautiful additions to any landscape, although soapstone is particularly nice to use because it is a locally occurring stone, and a fairly

rare one at that; it is said that the particular type of soapstone found in the vein at Alberene occurs in only one other location on earth.

If you have considered adding hardscape elements to your landscape in the past but thought the cost of materials would make a project costs too high or if you could not find a material to your liking, now might be the time to take a second look. Every year more and more products become available, providing just the right material for nearly every occasion.

And, do not forget the benefits of hardscape. They add visual appeal, but can also dramatically increase the functionality of a landscape. Establishing traffic patterns, providing outdoor-entertaining space or holding back steep slopes are just some of the benefits. Hardscapes are also often much lower in maintenance than their softscape counterparts that require pruning, fertilizing and watering. Some might even call hardscaping “water-wise” as it can eliminate or reduce irrigated portions of your landscape. The only thing you will have to remember with respect to water is that too much impermeable area could cause water run-off problems; reduce the likelihood of this by laying pavers, stones or bricks in sand or stone dust bases rather than on concrete slabs.

For more information about using stone and other hardscape materials in the landscape tune into the PBS production “Virginia Home Grown” on WHTJ, Tuesday, March 29th at 8 p.m. The show is live and provides you with the opportunity to call in with your questions.