

Taking the

When fledgling gardeners ask me where to begin, I always tell them to start with the hardscapes. Plotting your paths, patios, and walls establishes the bones of the garden, creating living space and instilling a sense of purpose and order. Without the hardscape features, plants can get lost and go unnoticed. Without the plants, the bones are bare.

Combining structural elements with plants that creep around, drape over, and stand before them makes the garden come together. Matching the right planting with a piece of hardscape softens the edges of the stones, blocks, and bricks and lends focus to the greenery. Different kinds of hardscapes demand different approaches to plants.

Soften Stepping Stones

Paths lead the eye through the garden as much as they lead the feet. A stepping stone—be it a flat fieldstone, a tile mosaic, or a cement cast daisy—gives the visitor a sure place to land their step, but also draws them through the landscape with a subtle suggestion of where to wander.

Planting around the stepping stones helps give the impression that the path was made by Mother Nature, rather than the gardener. To encourage this, try to make it look like the plant volunteered to be there, as if the seed was

**The right plants
bring out the best
in walls, ledges,
and stones.**

Story and photos by Eric Johnson



Edge Off

blowing in the breeze and the edge of one of the stones snagged it and it set root. Stay away from a tidy row of soldiers lining the sides of the path; rather dot it with meandering plants. And don't shy away from placing a plant in a position where it will need to be stepped over. This gives the garden visitor a real sense that they are in the thick of things.

Low growing creepers will serve you well. For annuals, think moss rose (portulaca), pinks (dianthus), alyssum, and impatiens (for shadier locales). Perennials like hen and chicks, creeping sedums, pachysandra, lysimachia, vinca, wild ginger, silver mound, and blue fescue grass do the job nicely. If you choose rock gardening plants you can't go wrong. Great choices include: alpine aster, ajuga, dwarf yarrow, creeping phlox (likes to take over!), and campanula (the compact 'Blue Clips' and 'White Clips').

If your path is in a shady, moist spot, growing moss around the stepping stones is striking and highly naturalistic. The vibrant green is like nothing else in the palette of garden colors. Moss prefers a little sun in the morning and afternoon, so partial shade is an ideal growing condition. The easiest way to grow moss is to transplant an existing patch to where you would like it. Moss grows in fertile soil, so you may have to amend the soil with organic

matter to achieve the best results.

Consider a specimen planting at the end of a path of stepping stones to provide a final destination, a reason for the path to exist. It's a perfect opportunity to showcase the bizarre and the beautiful: a *Corylus* 'Contorta' (contorted filbert), weeping pine, 'Endless Summer' hydrangea or a favorite shrub rose. A burning bush (*Euonymus*) is spectacular in the fall and is a striking structural element throughout the winter months.

Great Ledge Dwellers

Ledges can occur naturally or via the construction of a retaining wall or raised garden bed. They add height to the landscape and create a staging area for the plants. For that reason, the



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taking the edge off

plants that hold court at the top of a ledge or raised bed need to have a certain grandeur about them. Through form, color, or scale they work best when they top off the ledge with a flourish, while remaining grounded and connected to the ledge.

You can adorn a ledge with either trailing or upright plants, or ideally a combination of both. Non-trailing varieties are a great choice if the wall or raised bed is something to show off: fancy stone work or beautiful hardscape materials. Trailing plants cover up a plain wall of retaining blocks nicely. Full-figured plants, versus the tall and



spiky varieties, kiss the edge of the ledge, softening the edges and balancing the weight of the structure.

Some of my favorites include:

Coral bells (*Heuchera*). The colors are kicky, often highlighting flecks of color in natural stone. The leaf shapes soften the hardscape, but hold up the weight of the mass of a wall. They flourish in a variety of light conditions.

Ornamental grasses. The spraying, upright form works perfectly atop a ledge. Dwarf fountain grass is especially nice with soft plumes in the late summer and fall. Hakone grass displays a vibrant chartreuse green while it stands pert and fingers the edge of the hardscape.

Cranesbill (*Geranium*). A likeable plant with a bushy, meandering form that stays nicely in check. Its colors, bluish purple, pink, and yellow are soft, yet vibrant additions to the garden palette.

***Sedum* 'Autumn Joy'.** Highly used, but always a stunner. Versatile, it will grow in sun and shade and can tolerate the poorest of soil conditions. It has a honey-like scent when it blooms. Its blue-green waxy foliage goes well with most stones and its sturdy structure balances the weight of hardscape materials.

***Spirea* 'Anthony Waterer'.** This is a great shrub that mimics a perennial in appearance and growth habit. Its rich

fuschia blooms demand attention and its low-growing form has weight but is soft in appearance.

The list goes on. Select plants whose colors either contrast the tones of the hardscape or pick-up colors in the materials. And remember, plants with a moderate height and plump fullness look best.

Garden ledges are the perfect opportunity to send a plant over the edge. Trailing plants are eye-catchers in the garden, showing off their splendor like a bird splaying its feathers. They create a real sense of drama in the landscape and when paired with a fuller, upright planting creating a great appearance of texture and sense of movement.

The showy cascading annuals can't be beat for spilling over a ledge. Sweet potato vine, either 'Blackie' or 'Marguerite' (or a combination of the two) are always a welcome sight. Any of the cascading or Wave series of petunias will give you a waterfall of color, and a great variety of color from which to choose. Licorice plant is a good sturdy choice with its interesting leaf shapes and white and green appearance that stands out in the landscape. Engelmann's ivy can really take over a space, but is great for spilling over a massive area.



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Wall-Worthy Plants

Walls give a sense of permanence to the garden. Walls delineate space and also provide a wonderful backdrop for plants, helping the eye make sense of whatever is planted before it. Garden walls without plantings can look ominous. With plantings, walls define the space.

Planting in front of a wall is a great opportunity to utilize trees, shrubs, and architecturally structured perennials. Keeping the planting in scale with the wall is the key to success, and generally speaking, tall and skinny works best.

Some of my favorite choices include:

Juniper 'Blue Arrow'. A beautiful, elegant slender tree, this juniper matures at 2 feet wide and 12 feet tall, so a mass planting can easily be incorporated into a border. Its true blue color is striking against many backdrops.

Birch 'Summer Cascade'. It's a small (10 to 12 feet) weeping form of a tree with fabulous yellow fall foliage.

Red-twigged or variegated dogwood. The backdrop of a wall is a perfect opportunity to showcase the cherry red stems throughout the winter.

Barberry 'Helmond Pillar'. With an upright form and a width of 2 to 3 feet, this relatively new introduction is great for planting close to a wall, even en masse. The crimson color is striking against many surfaces.

Boston Ivy. Destructive on wood, but on stone or brick, it is a classic look, covering any size wall you may have. The varying shades of red, orange and yellow, all at the same time are a treat in the fall. The glossy, green leaves reflect light in the summer, giving a shimmering texture to the wall.

Structural Support

Along a wall, structures also enhance plantings. A trellis is a great option to fill a garden wall space. Go to the effort of affixing the structure to the wall, or staking it into the ground. The goal for the sharpest appearance is to see to it that the top and the bottom of the trellis are the same distance from the wall.

Some of the tried and true vines for a trellis include morning glories (be prepared for the prolific reseeding every year), clematis, honeysuckle vine (can get tall), silver lace vine, and climbing roses.

Why not take a stab at espalier? The art of pruning a tree to grow flat against a wall allows just about anyone to have a fruit tree in the backyard. The process is actually quite easy for the home gardener. (See *Northern Gardener*, November 2004).

Or consider a great piece of art for your garden wall. A piece of metal or clay sculpture breaks up a flat space and adds whimsy and drama to the garden.

No matter the size of your planting space, establishing the hardscapes and then softening them with your favorite plantings will make a garden that is livable and beautiful. Not to mention that in the northern garden, hardscapes give the snow something to artfully rest on during the winter months.

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