

“Do It Yourself Hardscape”

Are you looking for a do-it-yourself project that will make your landscape more interesting and save water? Consider a hardscape path or patio.

The hardscape provides a work and play area that can be very attractive without requiring all of the water and lawn work associated with grass. Some materials to consider are brick without mortar, flagstone, patio blocks and decomposed granite.

To view the rock materials that are available, visit a local hardscape supplier. They usually have exhibits of various options. You can also visit a brick supplier for ideas. Some websites do a good job of providing ideas. Books and pamphlets on the topic illustrate each step. “Texas Landscaping” by Greg Grant and Roger Holmes is one book. Your favorite nursery and the big box stores also have the “How to” guides.

Brick without mortar makes a very attractive surface that is easy to walk on or to use wheeled apparatus like wheelchairs or tricycles. Border the brick walk with treated wood two-by-fours for straight stretches and flexible steel or cedar pieces for curves. You want the brick to be tight together so the width should be divisible by the width of the brick surface. A good width is 36 inches if the brick is 3 inches on the side to form your surface.

Patio blocks can be used the same way as bricks. I believe the surface is less attractive but the blocks are easier to lay.

If you use flagstone or slate materials for the path or patio, the surface will not be as level as the brick and there will be space between the rocks. The overall look will also be less formal.

Apply decomposed granite to a caliche base about 2 inches deep. Tamp the granite with a rented compactor with a vibratory-plate tamper or roller. You could alternatively build a homemade tamper by nailing four 1-foot pieces of four-by-four on a 4-foot four-by-four post.

Patio surfaces can be higher than the surrounding beds and lawn, but for ease of mowing, the paths or sidewalks seem to work best if they are level with the lawn. To accomplish this, you will need to dig out the route of the path to accommodate the 3 inches of sand or 2 inches of caliche plus the depth of the surface material.

The first step in a project like this is to plan the work. I like to put it down on paper.

Use your garden hose and a paint marker to mark the area to be dug. Include enough space to incorporate the two-by-four border. You can spread the soil removed over the yard or used to fill in low spots in the landscape.

After the plan is completed and has passed muster with the usual review authorities – always a spouse and sometimes your neighborhood association, you can begin digging.

The sand provides a stable, accommodating base for the bricks, flagstone and other surface materials to set upon. It can be easily leveled. Decomposed granite does better on a base of 2 inches of caliche fill.

The brick, patio block and especially the flagstone do not need to be perfectly level, but you can use a level to check the path as you proceed, or even use a straight piece of two-by-four that when laid on your border will show you if the path is relatively level. The brick and other material should just touch the bridging two-by-four.

Drainage off the path should not be a problem if it is level or slightly higher than the surrounding beds or lawn. You can allow for a small slope (1 inch or less) across the path.

If you decide to eliminate a larger portion of the lawn in favor of a low-water use landscape to go along with your hardscape, a good strategy would be to kill the grass with glyphosate. Put in the paths and patio and then apply a 4 to 6 inch layer of shredded brush or other attractive but inexpensive mulch to cover the killed lawn. Plant perennials, shrubs and more shade trees as your budget allows.