

Hard surfaces

By R. W. Sidwell

In the terminology of modern landscape design trees, plants, lawns, and soil are soft materials. Hard surfaces are provided in various ways by stone, concrete, metals and worked timber. The truly "natural" garden will have no hard materials unless an occasional garden seat is to be allowed. Most formal gardens will make some use of hard surfaces. In the modern patio hard surfaces will dominate.

The choice of materials is important if one is to combine functional design with good taste. A Cotswold stone house should not be juxtaposed to multicoloured concrete paving. Similarly a Cotswold wall may look out of place a few feet away from Edwardian red brick. Transition from the formal to the informal, or one style to another is best achieved by a breadth of lawn or perhaps by a wide gravel path.

One should distinguish between function and pure decoration. Statues and temples such as abound in the larger 18th century landscapes of Kent and others must be used with discretion in modern smaller gardens. Sundials and bird-baths are more acceptable and they are, after all, functional too. I don't know what to say about plastic gnomes except: "Close your eyes and they might go away".

In the 1920s we saw the arrival of crazy paving. More correctly we saw it become fashionable or in modern language the "in thing". We could say that it became a craze. Crazy paving had long been used by people who could not afford anything better. It was, in fact, the trimmings from natural stone paving. The big house had the dressed stone, the cottages the waste bits. But in the period between the wars modern houses had to have their touch of the rustic. Suitable natural stone was not always available so broken concrete paving slabs were used. And if the supply of broken slabs was not equal to the demand they were broken up deliberately for the purpose. I still like to see well-laid natural stone paving in the shapes that nature made around cottages, and dressed "random rectangular" stone for grander places. The modern synthetic materials are a very good substitute for the latter.

At one time, weeds were the great problem in paved paths. Top pointing was not good enough to stop weeds pushing through. Cementing under the joint was necessary. Modern weedkillers have removed this problem. They are safe, even when shrub roots are just under the paving, which chlorate was not, and non-poisonous to warm blooded animals, which was the problem with the arsenicals. And don't point to Paraquat. Paraquat has only caused trouble when people have drunk the concentrate from the bottle, which can hardly be described as normal use of the material. In any case Paraquat now seems to have been superseded for this purpose by glyphosate ("Round Up").

The rock garden may present problems. This feature is a development of 20th century Britain and arose from the increased interest in mountaineering and mountain flowers during the late 19th century. Artificial stone "rocks" were often used in 19th century gardens. Examples of this are to be found at Madresfield, Chatsworth and Highnam Court but these were really a sort of Victorian "folly".

The modern rock garden is something quite different. Ideally it is based on natural rock formations and should have some resemblance to natural strata. Try to avoid the "almond pudding" effect, where a mound of soil has stones placed at intervals either flat or on edge. Stones should be built in so that plants growing on the top side have a vertical face over which to hang.

While a natural slope is the ideal site for a rock garden, there may be slopes where a more formal approach is desirable. Semi-formal retaining walls can be very effective. A series of low walls may be preferable to one high one and will involve moving less soil and exposing less subsoil.

Where suitable local stone is available, use it in preference to imported. I am never very happy at seeing Westmorland limestone used in the Cotswolds. However, if you are using Cotswold stone, make sure it will stand up to frost. Get expert advice on this, as much effort may be wasted if the stone crumbles after a couple of winters.



Soft Cotswold stone may crumble after severe frost.