

Answers to  
gardening questions

# Paths

By R. W. Sidwell

Whatever the size of garden, people will want to walk about in it and paths are necessary. Paths therefore are functional features but function is not the only consideration. Around sheds and workshops and places subjected to very heavy wear, concrete may be justified but, as we move into areas where aesthetic factors have to be considered, concrete is not the most desirable material, even if we make pretty patterns on it to imitate crazy paving.

At this time of year many people will be thinking of changes in garden layout and those with new gardens will hope to start next spring with a framework of design completed. Paths are the main feature of a garden design framework.

How many paths should we have and where should they be? It is a good plan to have a fairly solid path leading directly to the kitchen garden if a large kitchen garden is maintained. One doesn't want to wheel half a ton of potatoes over soft ground for 100 yards. Too many paths, however, should be avoided. They are wasteful of ground and can lead to increase in labour requirement.

The question of scale comes into consideration here. A garden of choice alpine, where several plants may be grown on a square foot, will be on a smaller scale than a garden of shrubs or large herbaceous plants and the size of the area between paths will vary accordingly. It is partly a matter of how closely one has to inspect the occupants. In large gardens, and especially where a garden is on different levels, paths should be sited so that outstanding features can be viewed from the best vantage points.

We will now return to materials. Having dismissed concrete for all but the most formal and functional uses — and with concrete I would bracket tar-macadam — we are left with a range of soft and hard materials that are acceptable.

Grass has long been popular for paths. Even back in Tudor times grass paths, cut with scythes or hooks, were fashionable. And when the cylinder-type lawn mower eventually became perfected in the 19th century and grass cutting was no longer a skilled job, grass paths became easier to manage. It may perhaps be noted that even as late as 1880 experts were saying that the new mowing machines were suitable only for the rougher lawns and would never replace the scythe!

Grass, however, has great limita-



Grass paths should be wide enough to spread the traffic load. Plants tumbling over the edge create a mowing problem.

tions. It will not stand up to heavy wear, especially in wet weather and if the strips are too narrow. One must avoid concentrating too much traffic on to small areas. Another defect of grass is that the path margins are a continual source of weed invasion into the adjoining ground.

A further defect of grass as a path in front of herbaceous borders is the difficulty of moving if plants tumble over the margin. One either has to have the plants well regimented so that they do not encroach on the grass or one has to mow round them or through them. None of these three alternatives seems satisfactory to me. The first requires that a strip of "no man's land" be kept between plants and grass. How much better herbaceous plants look tumbling over the edge of the border on to gravel or paving!

For those places where traffic is not too heavy, deep foundations are not necessary for gravel paths. In fact three-quarters of an inch of gravel can just be tipped up on firm level ground and raked out. Six inches of coarse rubble underneath will be better where wear is heavy. Gravel paths can be narrower than grass ones and, if the effect one seeks is that of the wild garden, edging should not be used. There is then no clearly defined boundary between path and planted ground. Weed-killer determines the area where plants shall die. This is the path.

Formal or semi-formal paths may be paved with crazy paving, rectangular natural stone or concrete paving slabs according to choice. My choice however for this purpose is brick. There are many beautiful brick paths about, both old and new. They look at their best is associated with brick walls. Cotswold stone walls keep better company with stone paving. If one can find some old bricks from a demolished cottage, so much the better. With the use of modern weedkillers, weeds are no problem and the bricks can just be bedded on sand on well-firmed ground.

Drives that have to carry cars must obviously be better constructed than those with light pedestrian traffic. For these I still prefer gravel to concrete or tarmac for the surface finish although I admit it is easier to shovel snow off a firm hard surface.

I once read — it was in America of course — of a dentist who made the drive to his house out of extracted teeth. There does not seem to be any reliable information on the tooth yield of the average dental practice. I do not think we can look to this source of path surfacing material.