

Hardscape in Garden Design

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Awakens our natural instincts for beauty, mystery, and repose

A garden's hardscape, which includes hard-surface elements such as walls, fences, gates and paths, lends support to the garden's plants whose job is to create pleasure for the expectant garden viewer. Hardscape can beckon viewers to enter the garden, separate them from the outside world, guide them through plantings, or stop them entirely to look at what is in front of them. Hardscape, in other words, works along with plants to satisfy a viewer's need for finding beauty, mystery, intrigue or refuge in the garden.

The Discovery Garden provides many examples of how hardscape enhances the pleasure of garden viewing, some of which are included in this article.

Gates

Large or small, open or closed, a gate creates curiosity about what lies behind it. The new gate at the western entrance to the Discovery Garden is permanently open and therefore welcoming. In the Discovery Garden, gates to the various rooms, such as the gate to the Herb Garden, beckon visitors. Home garden gates can be smaller but can be equally welcoming if open or provocative if closed. Materials for gates can vary and can be decorated to encourage or discourage entrance.

Enclosures

Walls and fences enclosing the garden as a whole provide a sense of shelter and escape from the outside world. When garden building first began about 9,500 BC, in ancient Mesopotamia and the valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, the garden needed shelter from marauding animals and desert winds. (The word "garden" is derived from Old High German "gart" which means an enclosure or safe place.) Today, the main garden enclosure is more of a psychological barrier from civilization's hustle and bustle.

Material for walls and fences vary from brick to bamboo. Of course, living material such as hedges also work as enclosures, but hard-surface enclosures lend a feeling of permanence against the ephemerality of plants inside.

Within the main enclosure, garden rooms can be defined by secondary, hard-surfaced enclosures that entice the viewer into a human-sized space designed for a particular purpose, such as an herb garden, a children's garden, or a species collection. Rooms are restful destinations along the garden journey.



Elaborate brickwork invites viewers to pause after passing through the western gate to the Discovery Garden and onto the easily traveled main path through the garden. *Photo by Sonja Nelson / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Movement

Movement is the essence of a garden. The best gardens are designed to move the viewer from place to place the way a novelist moves its readers from chapter to chapter. Enjoyment of the plants at one's feet eventually gives way to anticipation of new plants ahead. Hardscape can facilitate this movement with paths of many kinds. A main path can move viewers forward easily with wide, walkable surfaces, but branches to the main path can slow down and entice viewers off the main path to explore various plant delights. The branch paths might be made of stepping-stones or other hard-surfaced materials that slow down viewers to better see plants close-up.

Even small gardens can benefit from movement. If a viewer must walk through the garden to see every plant, paths can intensify the anticipation of seeing what comes next.

In a naturalistic or woodland garden, a path creates a human-sized space through which to move and guide the viewer through different aspects of the naturalistic garden. Benches along the path can provide resting stops.

Focus

Along any journey, one usually stops to have a look at something unusual. The same is true of a garden journey. A garden designer can stop viewers in their tracks with a striking focal point. Often the cause of the stopping is a piece of hardscape—a colorful

ceramic pot, a bright-colored bench, an imposing sculpture, a fanciful birdhouse. These moments contribute to the overall satisfaction of the garden journey.

Sense of Touch

Hard-surfaced materials in a garden can also help visually impaired viewers enjoy a garden. In the Discovery Garden's Enabling Garden, raised beds in large wooden containers can, through the sense of touch, guide fingers to the edge of a bed of plants that can be enjoyed by feeling plant textures.

Good garden design awakens our natural instincts for beauty, mystery, and repose. The right garden hardscape works right along with plants in bringing this about.



Left: Brick beds with trellises in the Rose Garden mark the north boundary of the Discovery Garden. **Right:** A side path with stepping-stones slows down viewers near Doc's Arbor garden. *Photos by Sonja Nelson / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

RESOURCES:

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