

## ELEMENTS OF GARDEN DESIGN

# SURFACES

THE SURFACE OF YOUR GARDEN IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE PLANTING, AS CLEVE WEST WELL KNOWS. HERE HE ADVISES ON THE MANY DIFFERENT SURFACES AVAILABLE, FROM NATURAL SLATE TO STATE-OF-THE-ART CONCRETE. PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLEVE WEST AND DEREK ST ROMAINE



Once you have determined the layout of your garden in terms of space, proportions and levels you will need to decide exactly how your surfaces are going to look. The terrace or patio is usually the first consideration and the wide range of materials available can be

overwhelming.

Before considering your garden's hard surfaces, take a look at the wider setting. It is important to consider the vernacular, as materials that are geographically at odds will never seem quite right. Stone, slate and even brick have marked regional variations in colour. These materials will provide an unmistakable link with regional architecture.

From the house, it's logical that there should be a smooth transition from inside out. But it doesn't necessarily follow that a wooden floor inside should mean a timber deck outside. It's more to do with the feel of the space. Uncluttered minimalism inside will harmonise with materials of simple form and finish. Busy interiors will withstand a more decorative approach in the garden. Much will depend on budget, but the suitability and contrast with other materials used in and around the house may also have a bearing on what you decide to use. Whatever you choose, a hard surface immediately adjacent to the house is always preferable and practical, as it enables safe, easy access and should give room to manoeuvre comfortably.

As always, scale is critical. The size of the patio should be as generous as possible and in small gardens may take up all the usable floor space. The scale of the materials used and the pattern in which they are laid will also play a part in the perception of space. Large units can help temper open terraces that would otherwise feel exposed. Used carefully in confined areas they can accentuate simplicity. Small units can work well in small gardens provided the design is unfussy. Various combinations of surfaces may be employed successfully but to keep a sense of order it's worth sticking to just two or three materials – complicated patterns or too many textures will compete and irritate. It can be useful to refer to the house for scale and proportion. The position of windows and doors often suggest spatial relationships on the ground, which can influence your choice.

Away from the house, especially in large gardens, gravel, aggregates and lawn are far more economical than hard surfaces. They also have a softness that seems more appropriate away from the structural influence of a building, giving a different textural contrast to planted areas. That doesn't mean to say that other materials can't be used away from the house. Paths and even seating areas among planting will maximise the contrast between hard and soft elements, and may warrant the use of a surface that is easy to walk on, especially in wet conditions.

Before deciding on what materials to use it's worth looking at them in situ. Garden centres often have a display of products but it's better to see them in a garden, where you can see how they relate to other elements and how they weather.



OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: A GARDEN SHOWING THE EFFECTIVE USE OF TWO DIFFERENT SURFACES. DECKING CAN BE LAID OVER EXISTING PAVING. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: A PICTURE AND PLAN OF A GARDEN FEATURING STONE, GRAVEL AND GRANITE EDGING. STONE MELLOWS WITH AGE TO GIVE A PLEASING EFFECT. A CONCRETE SLAB WITH HOLES ACTS AS AN UNUSUAL DRAIN COVER.

### THE MATERIALS

**STONE** If budget allows, stone is perhaps the most pleasing material to work with as it mellows with age and has a timeless quality. In rural areas, local stone from a nearby quarry really does 'ground' the garden.

It may not be practical to use local materials and urban gardens often have no obvious vernacular to relate to. In such cases the house interior becomes even more important. Large flagstones have been used for years both inside and out and make distinguished terraces. Sandstone or granite setts can be laid as edging and are often seen spanning whole courtyards, their small unit allowing flexibility when it comes to creating patterns.

Depending on how stone has been cut and dressed, it will work equally well with traditional (brick, flint, timber) and modern materials (concrete, steel and glass). But the cost of stone can be prohibitive, especially for large areas or if it needs to be cut to specific dimensions. It can also get slippery when wet, especially under trees. Cleaning the surface with a high-pressure sprayer will keep a relatively non-slip surface, but it will destroy the mature patina and any lichen or moss that gives aged stone its charm.

**PRE-CAST CONCRETE** or reconstituted stone slabs come in many different forms and do their best to imitate natural stone. Generally they are significantly cheaper than real stone and come in uniform shapes and thicknesses making them easier to handle and lay, especially if you are creating random patterns. However, a simple, unpretentious concrete slab can sometimes look as good if not better than the cheaper types of imitation stone,

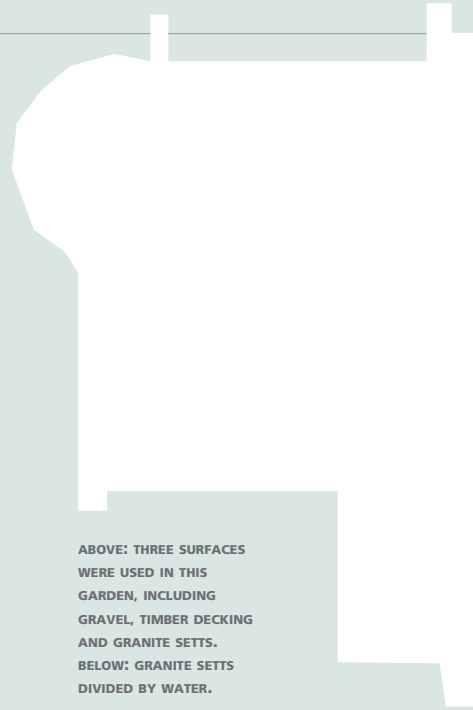


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CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP: THE DAILY TELEGRAPH CHELSEA GARDEN COMBINED A VARIETY OF SURFACES. THIS GARDEN IN EAST SUSSEX USES THREE MAIN SURFACES.

AGGREGATE IS A PRACTICAL OPTION. HOGGIN CREATES A SELF-BINDING SURFACE. BRICK PATHS ARE TIMELESS.



ABOVE: THREE SURFACES WERE USED IN THIS GARDEN, INCLUDING GRAVEL, TIMBER DECKING AND GRANITE SETTS. BELOW: GRANITE SETTS DIVIDED BY WATER.



## BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- Look at other gardens to see different surfaces in situ
- Consider the immediate surroundings, especially the vernacular architecture
- Restrict yourself to just two or three different surface materials, depending on the size of your garden
- Remember complex patterns and textures will compete and look fussy
- Ensure there is a smooth transition from inside to out
- Employ an expert if necessary

which can lose their colour quickly and collect grime, making the slab look dirty rather than weathered. Poured concrete can look very effective, especially in contemporary gardens, but an experienced contractor should supervise the work, as issues of curing and expansion must be taken seriously.

**BLOCK PAVING** is fine for garage forecourts but can look sterile, harsh and unimaginative in the garden. Imitation granite or sandstone setts look fine if used sensitively. **AGGREGATE** Large areas of paths and driveways are often laid using some form of aggregate, either washed gravel or stone chippings. Loose gravel, while somewhat effective as a security measure, is often badly laid and difficult to walk on or to use with a pram or wheelchair. Lately, hoggin (unwashed gravel) and crushed stone finings are being used where a self-binding surface is required. Hoggin, laid with a suitable sub-base, can be driven over, yet is malleable enough to plant into. It has therefore become the designer's staple when creating havens for herbs and self-seeding plants in full sun with good drainage. Self-binding finings from stone quarries, while not completely inert, suit a more contemporary, sharp, minimalist look. Essentially a waste-product, it was overlooked for many years, but is now substantially more expensive than hoggin. Larger sizes of aggregate or rock (scre) can be used to provide contrast in various surfaces.

**RESIN-BONDED SURFACING**, using anything from gravel to glass, is relatively new. It provides a solid surface to walk on while retaining an element of softness akin to aggregates, but is difficult to lay so best left to an expert. **BRICK**, like stone, has been used for centuries and is versatile enough to be used in both traditional or modern settings. Made from clay, bricks bring a softer texture to a garden and look comfortable with sandstone. Highly fired engineering bricks give a crisp, hard finish that is invaluable in contemporary spaces but out of place in a traditional setting. Reclaimed stable blocks, however, have the same hard finish and happily live in both camps.

**TIMBER** is another material useful for a number of situations. Decking, now fully ensconced in the designer's list of surfaces, can often be laid over existing paving to cover up unsightly drains, saving much time and effort by not having to lay a sub-base. Care must be taken however so that joists are prepared and treated to prevent the wood from decaying. Timber that hasn't had time to 'cure' can warp and while this may add to a rustic effect, in severe cases it may end up being a trip hazard. Treated softwood or more durable timber such as cedar can be adapted to harmonise with all types of settings. Reclaimed timber, while providing a more organic look, must be checked for signs of decay and splintering.

**RUBBER** is becoming more and more popular in schools and children's play areas. While it has great advantages in terms of safety, the inert nature of the substance is difficult to use in the context of a garden. ■