

# Don't forget the plants!

By Nancy Eastman

From the perspective of one designer, hardscape must not exclude landscape.

Driving around the new suburbs of Denver, Phoenix, and San Diego, I realized that we have so much impervious material burying our earth. Our Western garden is shrinking, leaving less room for a small tree, let alone a few shrubs. Almost every inch of ground around those huge look-a-like houses is anything but green. I began to wonder: Is Earth becoming a surreal lunar landscape without plants or wildlife? Are we really moving away from nature and the outdoor life? There are exceptions, but we are not saving enough space for nature in our developments. We are only leaving a few undisturbed places to remember our natural surroundings.

What is landscape? I thought I knew what landscape meant, but now I really see a trend that says, "Who cares if a tree is out there? I don't want the maintenance or the cost of plants and lawn to water. I want an outdoor kitchen, a fire pit or fireplace and a maybe a swimming pool. If I have patios everywhere, I won't have any maintenance. All I'll have to do is wash my patios and driveway."

When I hear comments like this from a client, I feel like saying, "Well, I guess you can have your green and oxygen on someone else's dime; maybe your neighbor will plant a tree." I think we are forgetting that landscape is our natural environment. With the development of the garage in front of our homes, hardscape began to march around our houses, leaving little land left for plantings and lawn.

That being said, hardscape surely does have a purpose in the landscape. In hardscape design and construction, drainage, grading and maintenance are the driving forces. The use of new grades and existing grades for drainage is an opportunity for materials that delay runoff, so that we can water-harvest in a sculptural way and increase the overall design aesthetics.

Retaining walls are necessary to level and stabilize sloping yards for better water retention and root environments. Wall rock often is terraced to separate and enhance different levels, making small gardens out of larger spaces. Hardscape can weave throughout and wrap around a landscape to define a lawn, natural contemplative gardens and entertainment areas. Hardscape lays the groundwork for handsome plant

compositions around the stairs, walkways and stepping stones that provide access to different views of the total landscape.

I've used plumbago (*Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*), Himalayan border jewel groundcover (*Polygonum affine*), sand cherries (*Prunus besseyi*) and aromatic sumacs near retaining walls, stepping stones and walkways. Ornamental grasses and colorful perennials such as lavender and penstemon complement hardscapes, as well.

The integration of hardscape materials with the house materials, outside as well as inside, leads to a successful design. Proper scale, subtle color differences and textural ways of working with stone, brick, concrete or decking materials need to be developed in a sophisticated way. Landscape is simply more beautiful year-round with plantings surrounding patios, pathways, boulders, rock walls, water features, rock gardens and the illusion of water with dry stream beds.

Pussy toes (*Antennaria spp.*), dianthus, blue-star juniper (*Juniperus squamata* 'Blue Star'), ice plant, thymes, veronicas, vinca, Manzanita, hens and chicks, and creeping Oregon grape (*Mahonia repens*) add interest year-round. Succulents and cacti-like soft-blade yucca (*Yucca recurvifolia*) are great in rock gardens and look beautiful no matter the weather.

Hardscape needs strong plantings to stabilize the whole landscape setting in order to accent and complement our natural environments. Strong specimen plants make a difference aesthetically by giving the viewer more interest and wonder. I've successfully used character ponderosas, Lena broom (*Cytisus x 'Lena'*) 'Royal Purple' and green smoke trees (*Cotinus coggygria*) and columnar Scotch pine (*Pinus sylvestrus*). Abundant use of plants as a colorful foreground and background softens the hardscape with balance and rhythm, giving us a landscape that is nice to look at and contributes to our sense of well-being.

As landscape professionals we need to make stewardship of the environment our goal. We need to reaffirm in our hearts a desire to create beautiful and healthy places. That can only be done by designing with nature.



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