

Step it up

With solid construction techniques and an eye for dressing up the ordinary, you can make steps highlights of your designs.



In landscapes with steep grade changes, steps are a necessity. But they are also a crucial design element. You have to build them with functionality and durability in mind, but they should also complement the rest of the landscape. With a little creativity, you can even make a set of garden steps a focal point.

“Don’t just give clients what they need; give them what looks good,” suggests Arnie Pellegrino, owner of Long Island Elite Landscape Design, a New York company that specializes in hardscape construction. “Offer them a package that’s pleasing to the eye.” For instance, in an area where you need a few steps,

you could build a small retaining wall on each side to frame the stairs and help keep them clean, he says.

“It’s not just about cosmetics,” says Derek Stearns, who co-owns Stearns Stone Works in Boston with his cousin Dean Marsico. Still, “with garden steps, there’s a lot of room for playing around with design.” Using steps of different lengths and incorporating boulders, railings, arbors, gates and plants gives stairs an always-been-there look that appeals to many property owners.

“Steps are like a cake and everything you put around them is the frosting,” Marsico says.

Material trends

In the Northeast, homeowners want their steps to appear old and rustic, “but they want old and rustic to look neat and clean,” Marsico says.

A popular way of achieving that is to use recycled granite that many street curbing municipalities are removing and replacing. Quarries buy the used granite and cut it into 4- to 6-foot lengths that are perfect for steps, Marsico says. With natural divets and bumps, this aged granite looks a lot different from smooth, newly cut stone. “You have this wonderful character there in the face of the step because it was

exposed to the elements,” Stearns says.

Stearns and Marsico say they’ve witnessed an evolution in the dominant material used to build steps in their area. Twenty years ago, most garden steps were made of brick and mortar because that’s what homeowners could afford, Stearns says. Then a few stone step projects were built, people saw them and wanted something similar. Within seven to 10 years quarries found a way to create a stone product the middle class could afford, he says.

Most quarries across the country now cut large stones specifically for steps, Stearns says. Using one



Get creative

Give your next garden step project personality with these design and accent ideas:

Make bottom steps longer than top ones. If you have five steps, for instance, and the top three are three feet long, make the bottom one six feet and the next one five feet so the stairway flares into the garden. Then station planters on the ends of the bottom steps. "That creates a really beautiful entry," says Derek Stearns, co-owner of Stearns Stone Works.

If excavation turns up boulders, incorporate them into your design. "Adding boulders and plants makes it look like nature took in the area and formed it," Stearns says. Quarries now price boulders that used to be considered fill material at more than \$1,000.

Add wrought iron railings. These make people feel comfortable when navigating steps, and can be used as vine trellises.

Build an arbor or gate. Both make charming entryways at the top of a set of steps.

Well-built steps can create a focal point of an arbor or gate.

stone for the top of each step is a good idea for two reasons: the material is easier to work with – "You just plop them in, level them and they're done," Stearns says; and the steps hold up better over time compared to steps with mortar joints, which eventually deteriorate due to exposure. If there are mortar joints in your risers, a solid top piece will help protect them from water, allowing them to last longer as well.

Pellegrino says the majority of his clients ask for natural stone steps, but a trend toward interlocking block steps and retaining walls is taking shape on Long Island. He recently passed the National Concrete Masonry Association's test certifying contractors to install these products, and says training through manufacturer-provided courses and seminars is a must for professionals who work with interlocking block.

Pellegrino says he tends to build small-scale, decorative walls and sets of steps with natural stone, while using interlocking block for larger projects that require more strength. The assumption that interlocking blocks, which rely on their mass to hold them in place, are a new building form is wrong, he says, pointing out the Great Wall of China, the Sphinx and cobblestone roads were built using a similar segmental method. "It's an old theory that's being brought back to America in a good way," he says.

For natural stone steps, Pellegrino says clients often choose one of his favorite combinations: bluestone with red brick risers. "Bluestone and brick have been around since Caesar and Napoleon," he says. "They're not going away."

Design/construction tips

If you don't plan and build them properly, steps can become a flaw in the landscape rather than a benefit.

Put careful thought into how many steps to build and how close together they will be. Sometimes a couple steps followed by a platform, then a couple more steps makes more sense than a long flight. "Look closely at the grade," Stearns suggests. "It will tell you what needs to be done. If steps look forced into an area, it ruins everything."

Dig footings to the correct depth for the soil type. If you don't, steps could settle with one side lower than the other. Direct water to run off steps by positioning their front side slightly lower than the back, and build risers between 5½ inches and 8 inches high, Marsico says. A lower riser creates a trip step; a higher one is difficult for short people to climb.

Do each job the way you know it's supposed to be done, Pellegrino says. Using the wrong material for the application, installing pavers incorrectly and not pouring footings where necessary are common mistakes he sees with steps. If a property owner wants you to build something you know won't last, explain the problem with their choice.

"The good guys lose a lot of work to contractors who just do what people ask for," Pellegrino says. "You should sell through education. Educate clients about what they need, then listen to what they want. That way both parties come out ahead." **TLC**

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