

Down the Garden Path

A well-done path is a wonderful addition to the garden or landscape. A path leads you into and through the garden. It becomes part of the garden. The lines of a path anchor the plants in the garden and remain ornamental even when the garden is dormant. Nothing is more effective at directing your attention to a focal point or distracting your eye from an unwanted view than the strong line of a path. (Steadman, pg 25)

Purpose of a Path

The primary purpose of any path is to move people from one point to another. In order to create a good path, you must decide what those points are and what needs to be done along the way.

- Do you need a walkway through the garden for you and a wheelbarrow?
- Perhaps you need a path through the yard to the tool shed or the compost pile.
- Do you want a path winding through the garden?
- Or do you need just a few stepping stones giving you access to perform routine maintenance?



When designing and developing your path, keep the purpose of the path in mind. The purpose of the path will direct the path's width, location and construction materials.

Placement

Paths in the garden need to be planned and laid out just as carefully as the plant material. They should take the shortest, most direct route, with few sharp curves or detours. It's obvious when a path is misplaced or otherwise inconvenient—those using the path take shortcuts and deviate from it, resulting in bare spots in the grass, trampled plants and broken branches. Put your paths where people walk.

Width

Paths should have even surfaces and be wide enough to walk comfortably and safely. Be generous with the width of your paths—wider is better! If you're planning for a single user, make your path at least three feet wide. Do you have children or a large garden cart? Do you want to accommodate two adults walking side by side? Then plan on making your path five to six feet wide.

Sometimes, you just need a service path—a path you take to and from the compost bin, the garbage can or the back door. Two or three feet may be sufficient for these paths. Like the garden path, these should be direct and smooth, with no uneven spots. You should be able to follow these routes automatically, regardless of what you are carrying, hauling or thinking about with no fear of tripping.

Straight or Winding?

How paths are designed will determine the type of movement in your garden—curves slow down movement, straight lines are fast and efficient, intersecting paths cause hesitation.

- Straight** A straight path needs to point to something or lead somewhere. There needs to be an ending—a fountain, a bench or a spectacular plant. The visitor will be left unsatisfied if the path leaves them hanging. This is not necessarily true of a winding path. Here, the path itself becomes the journey.
- Winding** A winding path is an invitation to take a leisurely stroll through the garden. It forces you to linger and spend time enjoying your surroundings. It engages and entices the visitor to stop, touch and look. A curve in the path also provides the gardener with fresh opportunities. A nook in the path is the perfect place to tuck a bench or birdbath. An outward curve creates a showcase for special plantings.
- Slope of your site** Another point to consider when deciding whether to use a straight or a curved path is the slope of your site. Usually, a straight path should be level, from end to end and from side to side. A straight path that follows an incline tends to look more like a ramp than a walkway. On the other hand, curved paths lend themselves well to a slope. Curving paths can easily wind up or down a hillside or meander over uneven ground.
- Style** You should also keep in mind the style of your garden when designing the paths. If your garden contains such elements as symmetry, crisp lines and carefully shaped plants, a straight path that creates a strong, clean line might be the best choice. However, if your garden is informal, more relaxed in its lines and shapes, try using a curving path that ambles through the garden.
- Focal point** A path is more than a route for your feet. It is a line through your garden or landscape that directs the eye—a line that tells the eye where to look. A person's eye will naturally follow the line of a path. A specimen tree, a piece of sculpture, a birdbath or a garden bench becomes more prominent when the eye is directed to it by means of a path. Therefore, when placing a focal point at the end of a path, make sure it is large enough to make a statement. An inconsequential birdfeeder at the end of a substantial path is disappointing.
- Diversion** A path can also be used to divert the eye away from an unsightly view. Let's say you have steps leading from the deck into your backyard. When you go down the steps and into the yard, the first thing you notice is your neighbor's RV parked on the other side your fence. A path placed at the foot of the steps directing you the other way will pull your eye away from the offending vehicle.

Laying Out Your Path

After you've decided what you want your path to do, you need to decide where to put it. Walk around your property noting the route you walk most frequently. Some areas will leap out at you—the grass may be worn bare from repeated use by foot traffic or dogs running back and forth.

- Deciding** Mark a tentative outline for your path with a garden hose or rope. Live with it for a while, looking at it from different angles. Walk along your proposed path. Is the width comfortable? Make adjustments as needed. If you'll be mowing along the path, test that the mower can maneuver easily along the path.

Preparation

Once you are satisfied with your plan, clear the ground and level the grade, if necessary. If steps are needed, now is the time to install them. It is much easier to fit the path around the steps than to fit the steps into the path. If you are planning to use stepping stones or pavers, now is the time to make sure they are spaced appropriately.

Safety

Safety is an important feature of any path. Anyone who has walked along a slippery, stone walkway knows how important traction is.

- Consider treating surfaces with a textured varnish available at home centers. The varnish, a gritty coating, is painted on with a paintbrush.
- Uneven paths are also hazardous. Avoid tripping or stumbling by smoothing out any rough spots.
- A long, sloping path is great for a mountain goat, but not for a garden visitor. Install steps and plan on having at least two. A single step is difficult to negotiate.
- If your path is going to be used regularly at night, be sure it is well lit.

Materials

There are many types of material available. You can also mix materials for an interesting look. Be creative!

Material	Pros	Cons
Inexpensive		
Native stone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looks natural 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uneven surface • Not as durable as other stone • Wet stone can be slippery
Mulch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readily available • Easy to work with • Permeable • Doesn't interfere with roots 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can wash away • Requires edging to keep in place • Sticks to shoes • Has to be replaced frequently
Gravel/ crushed rock	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readily available • Easy to work with • Permeable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noisy to walk on • Boring to the eye • Requires edging to keep in place
Grass	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readily available • Soft to walk on • Easy to maintain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs regular maintenance • Not suitable for heavily traveled areas • Difficult to maintain in shade
Molded concrete	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readily available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weeds between steps • Prone to heaving and settling • Repetitive design

Material	Pros	Cons
Moderate to Expensive		
Bricks and pavers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readily available • Durable • Low maintenance • Variety of styles and colors available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slippery when wet • Lot of prep work to install
Expensive		
Flagstone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looks natural • Durable • Even surface 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wet stone can be slippery • Can be difficult to install
Poured concrete	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flat surface • Stains and textures available • Durable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to install • Interferes with roots • Permanent—not easily changed or repaired

Design Tips

Here are a few things to keep in mind when designing your path.

Size	Pay attention to size. A large path made up of small pieces appears fussy or, worse yet, uninteresting.
Pattern	If you have a complex planting scheme, use a neutral paving material. Too much pattern may be busy and overwhelming.
Perception	If you have a small area that you want to seem larger, try adding a winding path. A winding path makes an area appear larger because you can't see very far ahead. On the contrary, straight lines or paths can actually make a garden or yard seem smaller than it really is. This is because your eye takes in the expanse all at once.
Consistency	The path should be in keeping with its surroundings and the house. A rustic path made from tree rounds is just as out of place in a formal setting as is a brick and mortar path through a woodland garden.

Remember, make your path safe underfoot and, whether your path is simple or elaborate, let it express your garden's unique style.

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