

Garden paths can be pretty and practical

Whether you planned them or not, your garden has paths - a path to the vegetable garden to harvest veggies for dinner; a path to a favorite bench to enjoy a glass of lemonade on a sunny summer day; a path to the compost bin, and a path to guide visitors to your front door. Paths are functional, but don't have to be boring.

Well-designed paths and walkways guide visitors on a journey revealing views and focal points; quicken or slow the journey's tempo; and anchor the home to the garden. There are several considerations when planning and installing garden paths.

Consider the function.

Essential paths include those that connect the house to the street or driveway and from the front to the back door. These utilitarian paths should be wide enough so two people can walk together comfortably.

Main paths through the garden should also be this wide so a friend can join you on a garden walk and to make garden chores easier. Trying to maneuver a mulch-filled wheelbarrow through a narrow space is no fun.

Secondary paths should be narrower – about 3 feet wide. These paths allow one person to discover garden spaces on her own. Narrow paths remind visitors to slow down, giving them pause to notice garden art, unique plant combinations, and garden vignettes.

Paths seldom used, like the path that leads to your stack of nursery pots and garden stakes, can be even narrower.

Straight or curved?

Straight paths are most efficient, moving people quickly from one place to another. They are ideal in formal gardens. Unexciting and harsh in informal landscapes, their edges can be softened with plants, like thyme, spilling over their edges.

Curving lines are generally more pleasing to the eye. They draw visitors forward to discover what's around the bend. Meandering paths reveal focal points and specimen plants one by one. Curving paths also make traversing uphill easier.

Material Choices

Consider the style of and materials used on the house, and choose complementary materials for paths.

Concrete is often used for sidewalks. Ideal for heavy traffic, concrete paths are nearly maintenance-free and easy to shovel snow from in winter. They can be tinted or stamped to add interest.

Brick is also a traditional, durable choice. Brick paths can be laid in countless designs and are appropriate in both formal and informal designs. New bricks are appropriate for paths in formal gardens. Old, worn bricks can be upcycled in paths in a cottage or country garden.

A flagstone path is a good do-it-yourself project. Although it may be too uneven for primary paths, it is perfect for paths in the vegetable garden or perennial border. Flagstone can also be utilized to create a path through the lawn, giving feet a place to step and protecting grass from wear.

Gravel or crushed granite is a suitable choice for paths through a garden. They both allow rainwater and oxygen through to tree roots. Neither of them will stay put on steep slopes, and edging is required to prevent them from ending up in the beds.

A mulch path is lovely in a shade garden. It is inexpensive, easy to put down, and sets a casual tone to a stroll. The bad news: mulch decomposes and will have to be replenished annually. The good news: mulch decomposes and adds organic matter to the soil.

Tips & Tricks

To make your garden appear larger, make a long, straight path a bit narrower at the far end. Or widen a curved path as it rounds a corner.

Be sure paths are safe. Install lighting along paths that will be walked at night.

Plant fragrant annuals and perennials along path edges. Their fragrance will be released when their foliage is brushed.

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