

Striking Simplicity



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Gravel paths-traditional, informal, permeable, durable



Depending on client preference, Erin Lau sometimes uses a very thin-profile plastic or metal edging on the borders of her gravel pathways. “I try to design so that, eventually, the ground cover will grow out and blur the edge between the gravel and planting beds,” she explains.

Photo courtesy of Erin Lau.

Sometimes simple is best. If you encounter a client who is committed to this line of thinking, you may want to suggest they consider perhaps the simplest building material of them all: gravel. While a high-quality paver walkway is certain to impress with its precision and perfection, a traditional gravel path can create its own striking impression by standing out from the crowd. Gravel paths can complement both traditional and modern landscapes with a timeless and informal look that won't break the bank.

Mike Ransom, operations manager at Lifescape Associates (www.lifescapeassociates.com), a landscape design-build firm in Denver, says, “We install gravel paths for a couple of different reasons. First, it's a low-cost option compared to other hardscape materials such as pavers or concrete or natural stone. But the other reason is we do a lot of work that is what I would call ‘European garden-inspired.’ And people like the English or French country garden look that gravel paths give.”

Ransom says another advantage of gravel paths is that they typically require very little maintenance, usually just an occasional raking. “We've found a method that keeps the gravel from traveling around too much and reduces the maintenance,” he explains. “Part of it has to do with the installation. Unless the client has really good, well-drained soils, we'll put 2 to 4 inches of road base down and compact that. Then we'll put down a layer of breeze [also called crusher fines]. Depending on the color of gravel the customer wants on top, we'll try to match that breeze material to whatever

gravel color will be on top.” He uses about 2 to 3 inches of crusher fines, and this layer also gets compacted.

Then the top layer of gravel is applied, and because of the prep work that’s gone into the layers below, usually only 1 to 1.5 inches of finish gravel is required, says Ransom. “That gravel gets compacted and worked into the breeze material and they commingle together, which keeps it from feeling like you’re walking on a sandy beach,” he points out. “This is what keeps the gravel from traveling too much.”

For customers who are concerned about the gravel material traveling off the path as people walk over it, Lifescape Associates sprays a tackifier on the finished path. “That really binds everything together,” says Ransom. “But usually we’ll let clients live with the gravel path for a couple of months first to see if a tackifier is really needed. A tackifier works, but it has to be reapplied, usually about once a year, so we try not to use it in order to keep maintenance down.”



Everything from standard construction gravel to highly decorative stone can be used when creating walkways.

Photo courtesy of Erin Lau.

Ransom says he’s found that it’s even more important with gravel paths than with other walkway materials to keep everything “tidy” during installation. “We want to keep the gravel out of the bed areas where we’re doing plantings or where we’re laying sod. The installation crews just have to slow down a little and not let the gravel get away from them,” says Ransom.

Gravel that is rough-edged tends to stay in place better than round (ball bearing-like) gravel, Ransom notes. He’s found that nominal 3/8-inch crushed granite works particularly well on gravel paths. “We try to take advantage of local materials without importing them,” he explains. “We’ve also used a material called squeegee, which is often used as backfill on excavation projects,” Ransom adds. “The granite is more grayish-blue, and the squeegee has a more tan color.” Regardless of the color and texture, he says that material in the 3/8-inch or .25-inch and smaller sizes work better than larger gravel in walkway applications.



Gravel is a simple, informal, low-maintenance material that can provide landscapes a unique look.

Photo courtesy of Maple Ridge Landscape Contractors.

Don Sitter with Maple Ridge Landscape Contractors

(www.mapleridgelandscape.com) in Duluth, Minn., says some people have the mistaken idea that, perhaps because of their simplicity, gravel paths can be installed by just spreading the material on the ground. “There’s a deeper base underneath a paver walkway than a gravel path, but a base is definitely required for both,” he explains. Sitter uses a Class 5 base material for both types of installations, as well as a landscape fabric between the native soil and the base. “Then, depending on what kind of gravel you’re using, if you

really want to keep it separate you can put another layer of fabric between the base and the gravel,” he adds.



Gravel paths boast an informal look and also offer the environmental advantage of permeability.

Photo courtesy of Erin Lau.

As with any landscape installation, job site access plays a large role in how much manual labor is required to put in a gravel path. “If we can get a Bobcat in there, we certainly do that. If not, we have to wheelbarrow the gravel in,” says Sitter. Just as the base is compacted, he also uses a plate tamper to compact the finished gravel surface after it has been applied.

Sitter says that gravel paths are sometimes chosen after a conversation with the client. “It depends on their budget. It also depends on what kind of walk they want. Do they want something formal or something more informal? All of those things come into play,” he states. Sitter notes that gravel paths typically cost less and offer a less formal look.

That doesn’t mean there isn’t a lot of room for individuality. “There’s all sorts of decorative rock available,” Sitter emphasizes. “We usually use a smaller, fractured rock for walkways because it moves less than a rounded rock.” Maple Ridge Landscape has used a variety of different types of edging on gravel path projects. “We’ve used paver edging, plastic edging, small rocks – those will all work. It really just depends on what the client wants,” he explains.

Erin Lau of Erin Lau Landscape Design (www.erinlaurdesign.com) in Seattle has built gravel paths using everything from standard construction gravel to decorative rock with more exotic looks. “There are many different textures of gravel you can go with and different colors, so there are a lot of choices,” she explains. “The price can really jump with the more decorative options though.”

She’s also experimented with pea gravel versus more coarse gravel. “Pea gravel is very beautiful with the small, round pebbles, but you sink into it more when you walk on it,” she explains. “That can make it unpleasant to use on a path, unless it’s a path that you don’t walk on very often.” She prefers irregular-shaped gravel, which locks together better and provides a hard, flat surface that can stand up to heavy foot traffic.

On one project, Lau and the homeowner decided on gravel paths because there was a huge amount of gravel already on the site, left behind by the contractor who built the home. “We saw it as an opportunity, and that way we didn’t have to charge the client to haul it out,” she explains. “And the client liked that aesthetic anyhow. It was a modern townhouse, and I think gravel these days is seen as very modern and simple, but it has the sustainable aspect of being permeable.”

Lau says that most of her clients particularly like the environmental aspect of gravel paths being permeable. “They also like the simplicity of it and the

informality of it," says Lau. It's somewhat ironic that gravel paths now seem informal because they are perhaps most associated with grand estate gardens, she points out. Lau cites The Beth Chatto Gardens (www.bethchatto.co.uk) in England as one inspiration for her use of gravel in paths and gardens.

Depending on client preference, Lau sometimes uses a very thin-profile plastic or metal edging on the borders of her gravel pathways. "I try to design so that eventually the ground cover will grow out and blur the edge between the gravel and planting beds. Then you don't have to worry about seeing erosion from the path into the beds," she explains.

There are limits to gravel paths. "You can't do much on a slope," says Lau. For that reason, she uses stone or concrete treads on inclines. Similarly, she notes that pavers can be inserted into gravel paths, both for aesthetic reasons and to provide more solid footing, if desired.



Everything from standard construction gravel to highly decorative stone can be used when creating walkways.

Photo courtesy of Erin Lau.

Another limitation to gravel paths is that they wouldn't work well beside pools, she adds. "And it's nice to have some sort of transition between a gravel path and the house. Whether it's a deck or a mat, it helps to keep gravel from being tracked into the house," Lau explains.

Gravel paths generally are easier and cost less to install than other hardscape materials, says Stuart DiNenno, general manager at Botanica Landscape Design, Construction and Maintenance (www.botanicaatlanta.com) in Atlanta. "You don't need quite as deep of a base, so there's less prep work," he says, adding that the installation of the finished surface also requires significantly less labor than the measuring and cutting needed for pavers or natural stone, or the myriad different techniques that go into installing concrete walkways.

But cost considerations aren't the only reason gravel paths are used, DiNenno emphasizes: "There are certain situations where gravel just fits better than anything else. It has a really informal look, where pavers have a more formal appearance. And we often use slate chips in contemporary landscape designs. And sometimes you have situations where you have to use a permeable surface, and gravel works perfectly for that."

Botanica uses a variety of retaining materials for gravel paths, ranging from steel to brick to natural stone, such as cobblestone.

The choice of gravel material itself also often comes down to personal preference. "It depends on the job, but we've used pea gravel, full-size slate chips, mini slate chips, various types of colored stone," says DiNenno. Slate chips offer an advantage because of their flat profile, he adds: "They tend to compact better, and they don't end up getting kicked around quite as much as pea gravel. When you walk across them, you don't get that 'beach effect' you get with pea gravel, where you sink in a little bit."

When dealing with rounded material like pea gravel, Botanica usually doesn't compact the finished surface. "I don't think there's a lot of value in doing that; the gravel is just going to lay the way it wants to," says DiNenno. If pea gravel is used, it may need to be "refreshed" with additional material applied every few years, because it can get kicked around. "Depending on the amount of traffic on the gravel path, it may require just an inch or so of new material every few years," he explains. "It's really a great, low-maintenance option."

Patrick White is a freelance writer based in Middlesex, Vt. Over the past 15 years he has covered hundreds of landscape installation and maintenance projects around the country with an eye on documenting the tools and techniques used and spreading the word about innovative ideas.