

Building Retaining Walls Creatively

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Retaining walls serve an invaluable function of stopping erosion and holding soil in place. But they also have the ability to contribute to the property's natural aesthetic value. With the increasing availability of materials, coupled with good design, a retaining wall can be much more than a functional addition to a property.

There was a time when retaining walls were considered a "necessary evil" and the entire focus was on hiding them, says John Peterson, design and sales manager for Exscape Designs in Chesterland, Ohio. But things have come a long way since then.

"Now, walls are being designed as integral parts of landscape concepts and actually becoming features or focal points," Peterson says. "The biggest trend we're seeing in retaining walls is trying to incorporate them into overall landscapes as features."

Materials matter

The increasing number of available material options has made it easier to build attractive walls that suit the property. As more options become available, landscapers are designing and building walls that are much more customized to the properties they're working on.



Retaining walls serve aesthetic and functional purposes in landscapes. Here, retaining walls house landscape beds, a water feature, a fire feature and provide natural seating.

"Many years ago, we were using wood timbers and natural stone, and only a few manufactured options were even available to choose from," Peterson says. "Now there is an explosion of material options when it comes to designing and installing retaining walls. This makes it much more attractive to incorporate

a retaining wall as a feature.”

While there is always room for personal preference, the trend seems to be going toward more natural, earth tone colors. Drewe Schoenholtz, owner and president of The Green Scene in West Windsor, New Jersey, says that a decade ago it was the norm to see retaining walls built from bright red block. Nowadays, he’s doing most of his jobs in earth tone colors.

“A bright red retaining wall is loud and doesn’t blend with the landscape at all,” Schoenholtz says. “The trend now is for more subdued colors that blend more seamlessly with the surrounding landscape. We’re not necessarily trying to completely hide the wall but it doesn’t have to be staring right at you so that it’s all you notice on a property.”

“People are looking for a more natural appearance out of their retaining wall,” says David Fairburn, CEO of North Point Outdoors in Windham, New Hampshire. He says that more choice has allowed clients to achieve that look.

“In the beginning, the available blocks were a simple split face and had a few gray color choices,” Fairburn says. “In the recent years, manufacturers have seriously advanced segmented retaining wall (SRW) product lines. We are seeing more colors, textures, and intermixed shapes and sizes. These advancements have expanded the palette that landscape designers are using to create a more unique appearance.”

Blending in

No matter where in the country, the trend across the board seems to be toward a more natural look. The landscape contractors we spoke with used phrases like “blends with the surroundings” or “in harmony with nature.” Clients’ interests seem to be toward retaining walls that don’t stand out, but rather blend in.

“We are seeing an increase in customers looking for natural fieldstone and granite walls,” says Fairburn. “In New England, most of us are surrounded by fieldstone farmer walls. In recent years, we have seen customers investing in the refurbishment and incorporation of these walls in and around their landscapes. Typically a natural stone wall is more expensive than an SRW. However, although we do have access to more impressive concrete block wall, you simply can’t recreate the look and beauty of real stone.”

Frederick Oskanian, owner of Terra Lawn Care Specialist in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, agrees that his clients are more interested in natural materials than ever before.

“I’m finding that people prefer natural materials over man-made ones both for their ability to blend with nature as well as the longevity of the style,” Oskanian says. “People want something that is going to be aesthetically pleasing for the long-term, and natural stone doesn’t go out of style.”

“Coinciding with the trend toward classic home design, natural stone retaining walls have been enjoying a real revival in our area,” agrees Rod

Elliott, owner of Green Acres Landscaping & Masonry in Arlington, Virginia. "Even though they can be more costly than other types of retaining walls to build, they have a timeless, elegant look that is truly unmatched."

But "blending in" might not only be pertinent to the landscape surroundings – it can also complement the home itself.

"If it's a stone house, we'll likely do a stone-based wall and if it's a brick house we might do a brick wall with some stone mixed in," Oskanian says. "In the same way that people want the wall to blend with the surrounding property, they also want it to look like it fits with the style of their home."

Peterson agrees. "When we're doing a project, we try to pull materials that were used on the house and incorporate those into the landscape design," he says. "If the house has a stone veneer, we will consider how we can use that same stone veneer and incorporate it into a wall. This way, the landscape and the house tie together and aren't completely unrelated concepts."

A greater purpose

Obviously the most important function of a retaining wall is holding back soil erosion. But there seems to be a growing trend of retaining walls that are multipurpose in their functionality. Oskanian says he is frequently incorporating outdoor lighting into the wall whether it is in the form of natural gas lanterns or discreetly hidden LED lights. If the wall is a necessity on the property, it can at least serve more than one function, he says.

"Seating is another function that they might want out of their retaining wall," Oskanian adds. "If we can build in seats or at least make the retaining wall at a height where they can sit on it, they see that as added value to its purpose."

Peterson says Exscape has incorporated seating, lighting and even water features into their retaining wall designs. A retaining wall water feature, such as a cascading waterfall or a flowing fountain, adds interest and appeal to the structure.



"The big question as to whether to hide the retaining wall or showcase it usually comes down to the material used. If it's a higher quality material, then we might showcase it. But if the client was on a tight budget and went with a less expensive material, we'll probably try to hide it. With a concrete retaining wall we might use some plant material that can hang over it and make it a little more appealing. Some green plant material also helps it blend more with the surrounding landscape." – GRANT JONES, DIRECTOR OF CONSTRUCTION AND DESIGN, NATIVE LAND DESIGN

Elliott adds that he has also seen a trend toward “living retaining walls” in his area. This latest trend is another way to greatly enhance the aesthetic look of the wall.

“These ‘green’ retaining wall blocks have space to add in plants,” Elliott explains. “The blocks are generally hollow so all you have to do is add soil and the plant of your choice. With a palette of color choices, you can select blocks for living retaining walls that complement your home, plants and flowers. Living retaining walls are popular for providing a softer, more natural look that allows the property owner to use every last inch of their precious garden space.”

There’s no doubt that retaining walls can get expensive and oftentimes the client chooses a less-expensive material like concrete in order to save costs. Even in these cases, there are ways to increase the aesthetic appeal. Grant Jones, director of construction and design for Native Land Design, which has offices in Austin and Houston, Texas, says that plants can be used to dress up basic retaining walls.

“The big question as to whether to hide the retaining wall or showcase it usually comes down to the material used,” Jones says. “If it’s a higher quality material, then we might showcase it. But if the client was on a tight budget and went with a less expensive material, we’ll probably try to hide it. With a concrete retaining wall we might use some plant material that can hang over it and make it a little more appealing. Some green plant material also helps it blend more with the surrounding landscape.”



Retaining walls can accentuate homes by using materials that complement architectural styles.

The importance of design

Good design is imperative not only for the overall look and style of the retaining wall but also for the integrity of the structure. In terms of trends, clients echo the same sentiment that they do with color – they want a retaining wall that blends with their landscape and is appropriate for their specific property.

“For a more formal setting, that might mean a retaining wall that is more straight and angular,” says Oskanian. “If the property is woodsier, than it might be more of a free-flow design with more of a curved wall. It really does depend on the architectural landscape design.”

One of the trends in design has been toward using larger paving stones, says Schoenholtz. A decade ago, the popular look was using smaller, brick-sized stones. But Schoenholtz says that he’s seeing an interest in much larger stones.



“One of the advantages to using larger stones is that the wall tends to be stronger,” Schoenholtz says. “While beauty is in the eye of the beholder, it

also seems to be a more popular look than smaller stone. The trend has been toward a more cohesive look. Instead of stones placed haphazardly, there is a lot of attention given to the design for a more fluid look that blends harmoniously with the overall landscape.”

But Oskanian says that nothing is more important than a solid design and good construction. None of the aesthetic trends will matter if there is a design flaw.

“The single most important thing is that it’s designed and installed properly,” Oskanian says. “One of the biggest trouble spots is getting proper drainage behind the wall. Retaining walls are a big investment making it even more important that they’re done properly. In our region we have harsh winters and it’s important that the freezing cycle won’t cause the wall to shift or lean.”

Fairburn agrees. “The key to a quality retaining wall installation is understanding the factors of a particular installation site that could lead to wall failure such as poor drainage or materials,” he says. “Our goal is to identify the unique issues of each wall installation and make the necessary changes to ensure that the walls and features we build will last a lifetime. The best thing you can do is take classes and certification of SRW construction. Once you understand the fundamentals of base compaction, drainage, backfill materials and the importance of geo-textile fabrics, you can focus on effectively using equipment and labor to maximize productivity. It takes a lot of practice to learn what works best for your crew and style.”

Aesthetics aside, it is utilizing the proper underlying design and build techniques that will ultimately make a retaining wall great.

“The bottom line is that everyone can make a retaining wall look good on day one – but will it still look as good in 15 years?” Oskanian asks. “That’s what truly matters.”