

SMARTGARDEN™ — Access to the Garden

Practicality and beauty can be combined in thoughtfully planned garden paths.

How you move through the landscape influences your perception of it: what you see at close range and how different areas of the landscape relate. A winding path can add intrigue to even the smallest landscape. In larger yards, walkways define spaces and invite visitors to distant corners. And providing access to the interior of beds for easy maintenance can be the difference between frustration and muscle strains from awkward reaches, and a relaxed attitude and physical efficiency that takes full advantage of the insider's view.

DEFINING TRAFFIC PATTERNS

In a well-designed landscape, visitors are guided—almost unconsciously—around and through the gardens and to areas of the yard used for recreation and relaxation. Paths and walkways enhance the visitor's experience of the garden, allowing them to get up close and personal with fragrant and texturally pleasing specimens, to appreciate subtle plant combinations, and to enjoy unexpected, playful displays of garden art. At the same time, paths can be used to draw attention to focal points and vistas that the gardener wants to highlight.

If you decide to construct a path—whether of brick, flagstone, pavers, grass, or the more informal mulch—keep practicality in mind. Where do you and your family travel in the yard? Do you regularly go from the front door to the driveway? From the back door to the pool? From the patio to the front yard? A well-traveled route is usually pretty easy to spot—it's where the grass is thinnest. That's where your path should go.

PRIMARY WALKWAYS

Once you determine the most-traveled routes, you can begin to design your path. First, examine your views and any obstructions along the route. Would a curved design enhance the walk? Would a slight detour around an existing or planned bed create interest? Will it connect

with another path? Primary walkways through your yard should be able to comfortably accommodate two people walking side by side. Plan to make them at least four or five feet wide. And make the curves broad—sharp, unexpected turns should be avoided. Traveling along the path should seem effortless, not challenging.

To view a variety of styles for paths, from formal cut stone to an informal mulched woodland path, and to get tips in path design, revisit "The Perfect Pathway" article by Barbara Blossom Ashmun in our September/October 2000 issue.

SERVICE PATHS

Other areas of the landscape—the compost pile, the woodpile, the tool shed, for example—may require access for purely practical reasons. This type of path is a functional feature, and usually doesn't accommodate more than one person at a time, so it can be narrower—two or three feet wide should be adequate unless you have a wide wheel barrow. And generally, it should be fairly direct—you don't want to amble down a winding path with a double armload of firewood. But practical doesn't mean unattractive. A neatly mulched, well-maintained path to the woodpile makes the journey more pleasant and safer.



A casual path of crushed stone leads to a rest stop in this garden. It also draws the eye to the bench as a focal point.

FOLLOWING THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW

The pitter-patter of little feet is not an altogether pleasant concept when said feet are trampling a bed of emerging spring bulbs. But how do you keep kids, dogs, and untrained adults on the straight and narrow—or the wide and winding, as the case may be?

Constructing a raised edge along a path reinforces its parameters. Stone, brick, or formed concrete can be set when constructing your path so their top surface is a couple of inches above the level of the walking surface. If the walk is adjacent to a bed, the edge does double duty, keeping mulch off the walk and in the bed. The

difference in height, even though it is just a couple of inches, is often enough to keep feet from straying.

Edging plants are another way to highlight a path and direct traffic along it. Low-growing plants such as ageratum, globe basil, lavender, calamints, and lilyturf are available to suit any garden style. They provide a pleasing transition between the path and the rest of the bed. Because they would be adjacent to the path and easily accessible for maintenance, this is also an ideal spot for long-blooming annuals that need seasonal replacement.

If a more emphatic method of discouraging traffic from specific areas of the yard is called for, try a barrier planting. A number of thorny or prickly plants are very attractive—from a safe distance. A hedge of holly osmanthus, Chinese holly, or pyracantha is formidable; rarely will kids or dogs take a short-cut through them. Even shrubs lacking lethal armor—such as inkberry, yew, and upright junipers—effectively control foot traffic when planted fairly close together.

ACCESS BEHIND THE SCENES

When you design a bed, access for maintenance must always be considered. How are you going to reach its center to pull weeds or divide a perennial? This is easy for beds that are no deeper than three or four feet, but

for those with a depth that exceeds your arm span, the answer is a discrete interior path.

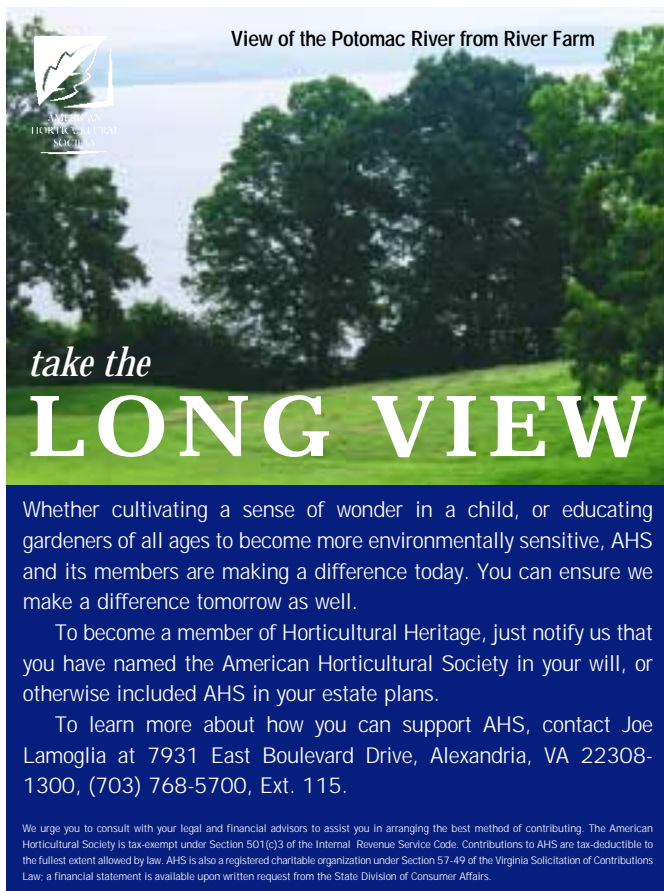
Keep in mind that traffic through beds should be limited, particularly when the ground is wet, because it causes compaction of the soil, and plants can be easily damaged. But stepping stones provide access with limited trampling. Pieces of flagstone or formed concrete pavers are inconspicuous, efficient, and easy to relocate if plant growth dictates a change. Space them at comfortable intervals so you can reach all parts of the bed.

SAFE PASSAGE

Safety is probably the most important aspect of any garden path. Avoid using a surface material that shifts underfoot—loose gravel may work well for a driveway, but it can be an uncomfortable walking surface. A path should be designed to allow for drainage, otherwise puddles and unexpected patches of ice can create problems. If the path is used at night, lighting may be necessary, particularly if steps are involved.

Planning paths through a landscape requires a great deal of consideration, with convenience, aesthetics, and safety weighing in to accommodate the needs and delights of all who travel through or work in your garden spaces.

Rita Pelczar, Associate Editor



View of the Potomac River from River Farm

take the
LONG VIEW

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