

By Dale McDonald

Stoneworks

Stone works wonders in the landscape

Using stone in a landscaping plan provides more than simple beauty. From structural support to accents to art works, stone is one of the most versatile materials available. And best of all, there's virtually no maintenance once a project is finished. No mowing. No painting. Just enjoying.

Take Devon Christensen of rural Boulder County, Colo., who spent nearly two years completing an ambitious project that used almost 50 tons of stone. From massive boulders that mark the beginning of his driveway to moss rock accents in the garden, stone changed more than the house's appearance.

"What I found most interesting," he says, "was that when we first moved into the house I didn't have a real attachment to it. But after doing all this work and finally seeing the

completed design, I do. It's like the stone is somehow giving something back."

Christensen's project evolved in three phases. First, he built planters in front of the house where he added trees and flowers. Then he tackled the south side, which was a steep hillside, and is now a flower garden. Then, on the north side, between the house and garage, he constructed a stream and small pond.

Education. Christensen hired professional help for some projects, but did most of the work himself. It was quite the education.

"Going to the quarry was like an Easter egg hunt," he says. "You make a design, then you go to the quarry or stoneyard and try to match the design with the stone that's available. Then they say, 'How much do you need?' Well, the fact is you don't really know. So here's my rule. Figure out how much you need then add another third. If you don't start



Inset photos: Jim and Ellen Wagner faced a difficult transition area between the parking area and the front door of their new house. Rather than build a plain retaining wall, they designed tiered gardens and a curving staircase. **Large photo:** Professional stone workers combine strength and skill with an artist's touch.

out with more than you need, by the end you get stuck with wrong-sized pieces. The beginning of the projects always go well, even if you didn't get enough stone. Then you have to start scrambling a bit, then you realize that it's not looking how you want, then inevitably you make another trip to the quarry to try and match what you have. Start with a lot."

Perhaps the trickiest phase of the stonework concerned the steep south side. After weighing his options, Christensen decided to create a flower and vegetable garden in that difficult space. Step one was a boundary of steps that circle from the front to the rear of the house. But these were no ordinary steps—they were thick slabs that weighed 600 pounds each. Starting from the bottom, he used a front-end loader to place each stone, then used an iron bar as a lever to make corrections. With the stairway done, he

was left to figure out what to do between the house and the tree line some 40 feet away.

"House construction is always a destructive act," he says, "so there's the question of what to do with the transition area between the house and the woodland."

The plan. "The plan we came up with centered on perennial plants, but we also kept some Ponderosa pines and added other native plants to reflect the woodland transition. Then we used a mix of quarry stone and local moss rock to build the beds. I like to call the finished project a formal xeric rock garden."

In addition to the terrain itself, there were other challenges. One was water quality, because the well water in the area has a high mineral content. The goal was to use as little water as possible, and find plants that would thrive in the high-mineral environment.

"What you see in the photo (below) is the

result of long-term planting," he explains. "To establish the garden took about three years, and most of the plants have been replanted. It's constantly in flux, but yarrows and butterfly bushes have done well. Also Mojave sage and Mexican heather. Over time the area has gradually evolved into a garden that doesn't use much water and is resistant to deer."

Challenge. Like Devon Christensen, neighbors Jim and Ellen Wagner faced a difficult transition area when their house was built. There was a 6-foot elevation drop from their parking area to the front door. What to do?

"We needed to solve several problems," Jim says. "A broad, curving stone stairway provided access from the driveway to the door, but we wanted to somehow beautify the area so that both the kitchen window and the guest bedroom window had a view.

"So rather than just build a retaining wall at the edge of the parking area, we constructed a series of tiered gardens that rise up from the landing. At night, a number of solar lights add a soft glow that is very pleasant."

To be sure, all the challenges got answered. The guest window now overlooks a miniature forest of trees and flowers, along with an artsy stone fountain that serves as an attractive water feature. The kitchen window, on the opposite side of the front door, has a clear view of colorful flowers and stone. **H**

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"I like to call the finished project a formal, xeric rock garden...to establish it took about three years."—Devon Christensen

Below: Devon Christensen tends what he likes to call a formal xeric rock garden. **Right:** This patio was planted with moss to soften its look.



Left: Quarry workers turn these massive slabs of stone into many shapes and sizes for landscaping.