

PATHS OF WANDER

For the designer, pathways are as fundamental to a garden design as the plants themselves; for the day-to-day gardener, paths lead both the feet and the eye around the garden. From a purely practical point of view, they help to organise your garden space, enable the gardener to direct (more or less) movement around it and provide access to difficult areas. They help to define planting boundaries and create the hard structure that holds the design together, particularly important in small gardens. Utilitarian routes to the recycling bins and wash line need to be navigable in all weather, year round, but those that encourage us to meander through our woodland and alongside the spring grassland display, give us a lot more scope for creative design. Keep in mind too, that gardens are a sensory experience so design a path that takes you past the wildlife shrubbery and brings you closer to the peeling bark of a Paper-thorn. And brushing past fragrant shrubs can be a favourite evening de-stressor!

Practical considerations:

The purpose of the pathway: the reason for the path informs both its length, the material used, and the design. If a route is used only to take a slow stroll in good weather, the materials used can be less hard wearing, like sawdust and bark mulch. Paths used frequently, and to push wheelbarrows, need to be wheel friendly. Paths used in all weather – to the garage and rubbish bin – must be safe underfoot, not covered in a slick pool of water, and built of durable materials.

- Length and width of the pathway: The longer and wider the path, the more expensive it can be to build which can influence your materials used. The width will be determined by its use. Wheelbarrows and tools need a space wide enough to prevent plant damage and injury to the gardener. For the meandering routes, you can choose whether to fit one or two people comfortably side-by-side.
- Position: there will be some that you purposefully place to force a direction of movement around the garden; with one or two you may have no choice so go with the flow, save yourself time and frustration and place them where people and pets have already carved a rough path.
- Habitat area: this will inform the type materials used. Soft sand, sawdust or straw covered surface suits a grassland meadow path better than a sleeper surface would. A woodland path lends itself to soft bark chip or even sawdust as they blend in with the cool shade, whereas a gravel strip looks natural winding through the succulent garden. Around the house, match materials to the house and patio.

- Wheel friendly pathways: It is easier to push a plant-laden barrow over crushed stone than over gravel, square pavers with wide gaps are impractical for this purpose, and even large pieces of bark chip tend to move around as the wheel moves over them. Here, small chips or shredded bark are better choices.
- Choose materials wisely for shade; pavers, slasto, etc. can get slippery when wet, and will need maintenance in the rainy season to keep clear of mould and moss. Falling leaves – in winter especially, can cover gravel quickly and require constant maintenance.
- Paths in high traffic areas must provide a safe and secure footing for walkers, particularly in inclement weather. Do you have a pack of excitable dogs? Provide enough space for dogs and humans.
- If the ground under a planned path has poor drainage, rather choose a material that will lift you above any pooling water. Bark chip and straw could turn into a soggy mess.
- Edging: Edging keeps materials like gravel, bark and sawdust in place and prevents bleeding into the flower beds or lawn.
- Bare foot pathways: if you have kids or you enjoy walking around your garden with bare feet, stay away from gravel! This material is especially unfriendly to unshod feet but if you love the look rather use crushed stone.

Materials:

For the responsible gardener choosing a material with a low carbon footprint is important. All materials have some ecological footprint, travelling costs, and others, like aluminium popular in modern design, have high extraction and manufacturing values. For pathway materials, bark chip, gravel and stone crush have the lowest carbon footprints if sourced locally.

- **Bark:** this can come in a variety of sizes, from big chunks to soft shredded bark often used as mulch. The larger pieces tend to slide around on top of each other, while the finer pieces settle in better once moist and a bit worn. Bark is easy for the home gardener to instal as it is much lighter in weight than stone, pavers and gravel, and is relatively cheap. It does break down in time and should be topped up every couple of years.
- **Sawdust:** this can be difficult to get. Try a wood mill nearby, or a local tree cutting company. Horse and animal feed companies often stock a variety of shredded wood. This natural product is beautifully soft underfoot but does need an edge and a base that drains well. Disadvantages: fine sawdust tends to form a surface crust that can become impermeable, preventing water from penetrating evenly and in time

creating gouges in the path; use a rake to loosen it. Sawdust is also light and may not stand up to strong winds and heavy rains, and decomposes quickly so will need to a regular top up.

- **Straw:** this is a short -term material and is only really practical if you have a local source close by, and it may come along with some grass seeds! It is very effective in soaking up muddy puddles and can be used as a wet season solution or quick improvement before a family gathering.
- **Sand:** this is a natural choice for coastal gardens in particular, but will look good anywhere. It does stick to feet and shoes being traipsed into houses, so use it in areas where it will be walked off before you head back into your house. The powdery form is softer underfoot than river sand but is more expensive. Sand is a good match with natural stone pavers set at intervals along its length.
- **Gravel:** Advantages: Although heavy, it is easy for the home owner to put in place. Looks great with succulents and other water wise plants and allows water to penetrate easily. Disadvantages: rather unfriendly underfoot. Large areas of gravel get very hot making it difficult for small wildlife species to navigate, and raising the ambient temperature. Weeds often take root as they are blown in, but are easily dislodged with a rake. Use an edging to prevent flower bed bleed.

Recycled materials: using recycled materials is a very creative way to make use of bit and pieces that might otherwise find their way to the dump. Mix pieces of broken cement slabs, old pavers and bricks for a unique path. Leave spaces for the odd plant, and the path itself will be the reason for the meander rather than the landscape through which it wanders. Make your pavers with broken bits of tile and pottery and place them at the entrance of the path or below a bench set into a little alcove on the side.

Edging materials:

This is another area where you can show off your creative skills at the same time as recycling items from your gardens' dump site. A visit to the city dump is always interesting and could uncover a few gems. Old terracotta roof tiles make great edges, and if you can't find enough for the entire length of the path, combine them with other materials. Place them as you would your plants – in groups, repeated along its length. A mix of old bricks and clay paving bricks work well and add a few small rocks for plants to drape over. Edgings increase the width of a pathway, giving space for plants to spill over without interfering with walking room. It is important though, especially if the surface materials are impermeable and the edging is higher than the path, that rainwater can drain away through gaps in the edging materials. Cobbles can be used in a more formal design but are a more expensive option, as are building bricks and clay pavers. Log roll work well with bark and gravel, or

source other timber from demolition yards. Place long wooden pieces, old branches and gum poles on straight paths. Make sure your wood is from timber plantations and not from wild hardwood nurseries.

Edging plants for your walkway:

Sunny areas:

Most low growing clumping forms make good edging plants.

Agapanthus africanus – Dwarf Agapanthus

Bulbine abyssinica – Stalked Bulbine

Gerbera ambigua – Pink & White Gerbera

Aloe chabaudii - Chabaud's Aloe

Aptenia cordifolia - Aptenia

Gazania and *Arctotis* species

Pelargonium tongaense – Tongan Pelargonium

Felicia amelloides – Kingfisher Daisy

Geranium incanum – Carpet Geranium

Polygala fruticosa – Heart-leaved Polygala

Dietes spp.

Arctotheca calendula – Cape Marigold

Crassothonna cacalioides (*Othonna carnosa*) - Othonna

Aristea ecklonii – Blue Stars

Barleria repens 'Rosea' – Small Bush Violet (rose-pink form is smaller and neater)

Grasses:

Aristida junciformis - Ngongoni

Melinis nerviglumis - Bristle-leaved red top

Shady pathways:

Chlorophytum species

Crassula spp. (*multicava*, *pellucida*, *sarmentosa*, *capitella*)

Clivia spp.

Haemanthus albiflos

Plectranthus ciliatus, *purpuratus*, *verticillatus*,

Cyperus albostriatus, *prolifer*

Dietes butcheriana, *flava*,

Bulbine natalensis

Selaginella kraussiana

Gorgeous bark:

Commiphora harveyi – Corkwood
Vachellia xanthophloea - Fever Tree
Vachellia (Acacia) siebieriana – Paperbark Thorn
Heteropyxis natalensis - Lavender Tree
Drypetes natalensis – Natal Ironplum
Heteromorpha arborescens – Parsley Tree
Mundulea sericea – Cork Bush
Ochna arborea – Cape Plane
Xymalos monospora – Lemon Wood
Zanthoxylum capense – Small Knobwood

Fragrant plants:

Use smaller varieties to edge the path, the large species can be placed further back, but still within arms' reach as many plants release their fragrances through touch. Place shrubs with a strong fragrance like *Syncolostemon* species where the passer-by will brush up against them. Cut the lower branches up and underplant with shade loving groundcovers. Small trees can also be used in the same way – many species have fragrant leaves like *Heteropyxis natalensis*, while others, like the *Buddleja* and *Rothmannia* families, have highly fragrant flowers. Let the sweet smelling *Jasminum multipartitum* or *J. angulare* wind up a tree trunk or an arch, close to the path in order to experience the pathway with the senses.

Tulbaghia species S
Artemisia afra - African Wormwood S
Helichrysum species S
Eriocephalus africanus - Wild Rosemary S
Syncolostemon densiflorus – Pink Plume S
Salvia africana lutea / *Salvia chamaegleana* S
Hoslundia opposita – Orange Bird-berry S
Hypericum revolutum – Curry Bush S
Buchu and *Coleonema* for the Cape S
Heteropyxis natalensis leaves - Lavender Tree T
Buddleja species flowers - Sage bushes T/S
Baphia racemosa flowers - Natal Camwood T
Rothmannia species flowers – September Bush T
Vepris lanceolata leaves – White Ironwood T