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Preparation: Outdoor Flooring 101

Get clear on what's underfoot

Often overlooked, the floor, whether formed of hard or soft materials, will make a great difference in the look of the completed space and is therefore one of the most important elements in the garden.

The floor serves as a background for the widest possible range of activities. It should not, therefore, dominate the design, but should rather provide a subtle understatement into and around which the boundaries and planting of the garden can be woven.

Hardscaping will provide paths, surfacing for utility areas, steps, ramps, parking areas for vehicles or room for sitting and dining. In terms of cost, it may account for up to half of your total garden budget, so it makes sense to choose wisely. You'll want to be certain to select a type and material that is not only efficient and utilitarian, but also pleasing to the eye. Fortunately, the market is chock full of feasible options. Here are the basics on the most popular ones:

Concrete: The most basic of the basic and also the most cost effective. On the down side, it can be down right boring and cold to look at; which is probably why someone invented patterned and dyed concrete. Stamped to imitate the more expensive materials like cobblestone, flagstone and slate, it is priced higher per square foot than regular concrete. The secret to patterned and dyed concrete is the finish. It should look as convincing as possible. The art is in the coloring. Make certain you know what you are getting before you make the decision to avoid being disappointed. \$

Pavers: A step up in cost, brick is one of the finest small modules available for paving; it comes in a vast range of colors, finishes and densities, and can form the perfect link with a house built of the same material. Pavers often have patterned surfaces and are effectively used as a contrast within another surface or alone for paths or drives where a good grip is important. \$\$

Cobble stone & Boulders: Cobbles are small and boulders large, but both are rounded, water worn stones from river beds. Colors will vary, according to source, from almost black through blue-grey to pale grey and white. They form an uneven surface and are ideal where grip is needed. They are usually unsuitable for paved areas where furniture is likely to be used. Cobbles and Boulders associate particularly well with water and can be either laid loose or bedded in mortar. \$\$\$

Natural Stone: Cut stone, Veneer, Tumbled Stone, Irregular Flagstone, Quartzite and Fieldstone. These materials are found all over the world. They display a wonderfully large range of subtle colors and textures, and this variation is what makes natural stone one of the finest and most sought-after materials for your new garden room. It is generally most expensive. Natural stone is perfect for seating areas, paths, terraces and pool decking. It can be supplied new, sawn into slabs of virtually any size or tumbled. \$\$\$\$