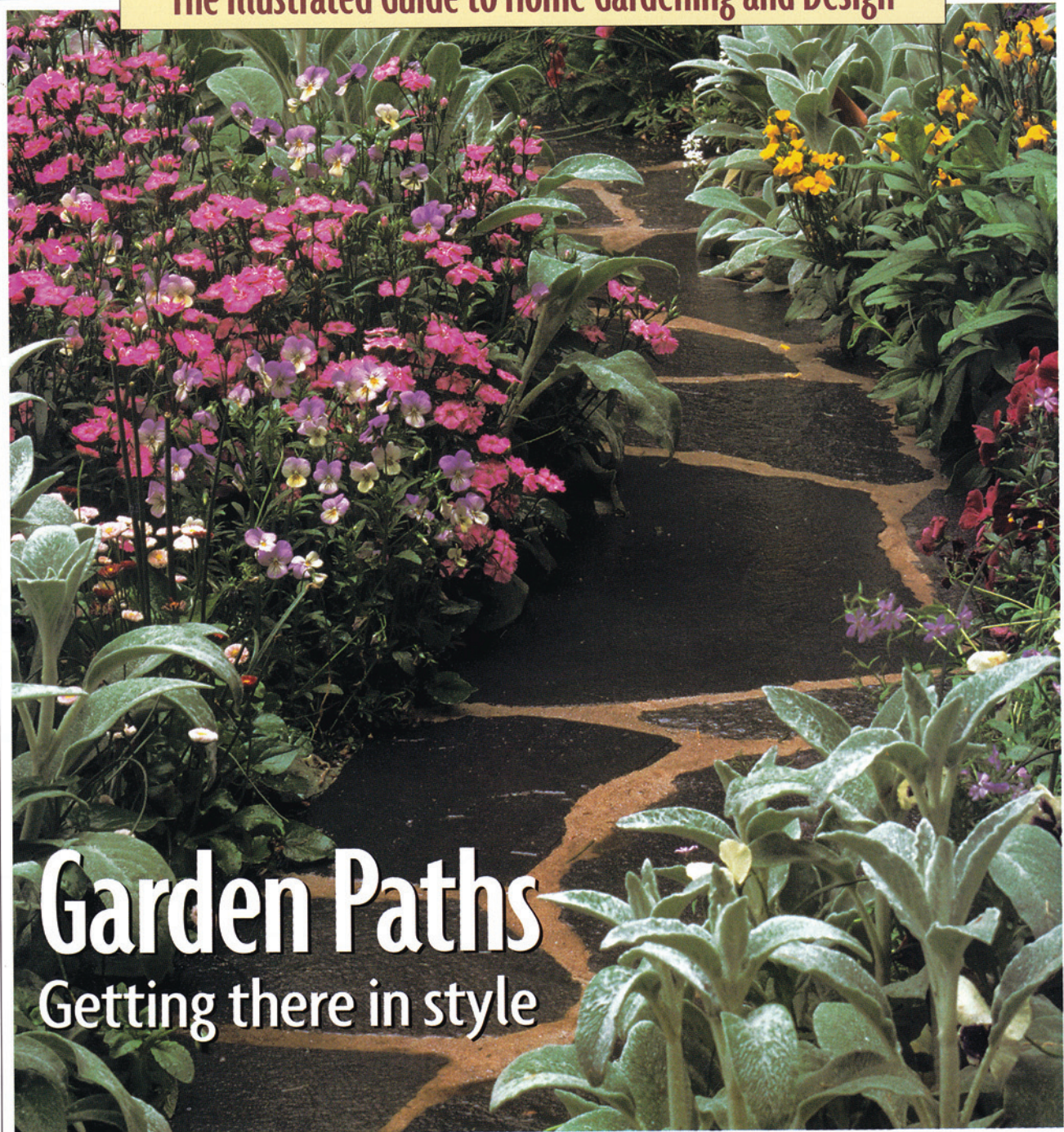


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Garden Paths
Getting there in style

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On the Right Path

As they say, "Getting there is half the fun." Why not do it in style?

Strolling down a garden path, soaking in the sights and smells of your efforts is one of the best rewards of gardening. It's as simple as that. The path is your conduit *into* the garden. Or through it. It's definitely not detached. In fact, when done well, a path truly becomes part of the garden.

But then, you probably know all this and might be wondering why we're bringing you an article devoted to garden paths. The reason is that there is sometimes value in stating the obvious. Because a path is such an integral and enjoyable part of the garden, we felt that reviewing some general guidelines on where to have a path and what material to use would be useful. Plus, we thought that perhaps one of the photos might spark an idea.

As you read this article and look at the photos, keep in mind that the most important thing to consider when planning a path is what is right for you. For example:

A really elegant flagstone pathway through a hard-working, cut-flower garden may be overkill.

A rustic stepping-stone walk to an exquisite gazebo may detract from the beauty of the structure.

As you can see, short of common sense, there really are no hard and fast rules to follow. With that said, the best advice I can offer is for you to look at all the examples in this story, visit your library and look at a bunch more books on garden design (put the copy machine to use), *then* decide what kind of path you think is right for you and your garden.

But, before I tell you exactly how to go about building a path of your own, let's revisit some of the basic reasons for having a path and go through a survey of materials you can use to make one.

The refined look of stone set in mortar ► blends well with this lush perennial bed. Not only does the path offer up-close and personal views of the flowers, it also allows you to maintain them.



PHOTO: M.C. PINDAR DESIGN: WILLIAM SMITH

▲ This stone path through a lawn takes the guess work out of where to go and also reduces wear and tear on turf.

The purpose of the path

The bottom line is that the primary objective of any path is to get you from one point to another. This is true whether you're getting there literally or visually. However, what those points are and what you plan to do along the way, also come into play when planning a path. The following scenarios offer a sampling of typical reasons for adding a path to your garden scheme. But don't stop here — come up with reasons of your own.

Sheer pleasure is as good a reason as any for a garden path. The flagstone path set in mortar that is shown at the left is designed to bisect a fairly large flower bed. It allows you to get close to the plants, to feel them and smell them. Although this is a highly functional and well-used path, the quality of the craftsmanship and the choice of materials help it take on an aesthetic quality of its own. It almost serves as a sculptural element.

Getting across the lawn is a challenge faced by many gardeners. If you have a frequently traveled route of open lawn (perhaps one that has felt more than a few passes of a wheelbarrow), over time, that grass is going to wear down and you'll *wish* you'd put in a path. Simply setting stone into the lawn, such as shown in the inset photo to the left, not only prevents a worn patch of grass, it helps a visitor to your garden know where to walk. Admit it, at one time you faced a lawn and really weren't sure if you should walk across it. I guess all those "Keep Off The Grass" signs must have had some kind of subliminal impact on us.

Directing a view in the garden can be accomplished by many means, but few are more effective than the strong line of a path. The garden shown to the right is a good example. While the sculpture, which serves as a focal point, would probably be noticed sooner or later, running this path straight to it forces the viewer's eye to see it. This technique is taken even further by using a vertical focal point. In such a case, your eye is literally drawn up to the horizon. This is a very helpful trick to keep in mind if one side of your garden has a great view and the other side doesn't. Remember, you have more control over where your garden guests look than you might think.

Traversing a woodland is too frequently left to the adventurous and sturdy of foot (and shoe) simply because there isn't a clear path to follow. If you are fortunate enough to have a large piece of land, take full advantage of it by creating a path that invites, if not beckons, you. We'll discuss materials on the next pages, but keep in



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▲ **The strong lines of a path lead the eye.** Keep this in mind when designing in the garden and use paths to focus attention on the the objects and vistas you want to show off.

mind that more often than not, a bucolic wooded effect will be enhanced by a path that is made of native material. The garden shown in the photo below left used rock found on site and has the appearance of always having been there.

A functional path need not look utilitarian. The middle photo below shows a simple, hard-working path of precast concrete pavers that serves as a highly functional access to the garden. While it

offers all the virtues of a path for sheer pleasure, it also stands up to heavy use and allows water to easily reach the roots of the surrounding plants.

A path to the door is about as straightforward as it gets. While this gardener could just as easily have used a concrete path, laying these stones creates a rustic feeling that is in keeping with the architecture of the house and the natural feeling of the pine-straw-covered yard. This path serves the purpose for which it was intended, but it does so in style.

PHOTO: © SUSAN ROTH DESIGN/WARNER GARDENS



▲ **Walking through a wooded area** should be safe and pleasant, and the path you are on should look as though it belongs. Whether you use material that was actually found on site (as shown above) or whether you bring the material in, stick with natural materials, such as stone and wood.



▲ **Pretty but functional**, this path serves the purpose of maintenance access while creating an attractive foreground for the flower bed.



M.C. FINDER

▲ **A path from the drive to door** gets traveled fairly heavily. Therefore, it has to be efficient, but, as in this case, it can look good, too.

Path materials

There are about as many materials for pathways as there are reasons for having one. The criteria for selection are similar to those for choosing a location. In short, you need to think about the purpose of the path, the setting in which it will be found and any pertinent safety issues.



© SUSAN ROTH

Stone

Stone is a personal favorite of mine when it comes to garden paths. Nothing else gives the same combination of being both natural and man-made.

When using stone, you'll have the choice of setting it in mortar or using it loose as shown to the left. The choice is primarily one of stability. Stones set in

mortar are less likely to wobble. Stones that are loose allow water to penetrate.

Keep in mind that stone normally found in your area will look more like it belongs. And it will definitely be cheaper.

Also, for safety's sake, keep in mind that some stone, like flagstone and slate, can get pretty slippery when wet.



© LARRY LEEFER/GRANT HEILMAN

Mulch

Readily available, easy to work with and very gentle on the earth, mulch paths are ideal for wooded or rustic areas. I wouldn't advise using mulch for paths that will be heavily traveled or need to be used during, or soon after, a heavy rain.

Mulch paths are also good candidates between flower beds. They're permeable (water and air pass through), won't interfere with any lateral roots, and never need sweeping. The only downside is that mulch sometimes has a tendency to jump its borders and can get a little thin over time.

© CLIVE NICHOLS/OLD HECROY



Decorative tile

The path shown above is not for every garden, but I bet every gardener can appreciate it. A wide range of decorative tiles are available, and you are only limited to what your imagination and bank account can handle. However, if you really like this idea but don't want to spend a fortune, consider making your own tiles by filling 2x4 forms with mortar and pressing broken plates, glass, salvaged tile pieces or other items into it.

You might also consider the idea of using a band of decorative tile to border a path of another material.

You almost always want to set tile in mortar because the individual pieces need to work together. Any pieces that are jutting up or sliding over have a tendency to throw the pattern off.

Grass

Though not suitable for heavily trafficked areas, grass is without a doubt the easiest type of path to install; just sow the seeds or lay sod.

Though easy to put in, grass has the disadvantage of being harder to keep up when used as a path. A good, healthy stand that not only looks good but can also serve out its function, will require weeding, watering, feeding and mowing — something no other path requires.

That said, one look at the path above offers several reasons for using grass. It's green, lush and alive, making it easy on the eyes. It can be easily modified to almost any shape, and it blends well with most garden settings. Plus, to me, it has an almost aristocratic feeling to it, conjuring images of a long-gone gardening era.



© CLIVE NICHOLS/RED GABLES

Concrete

Concrete is without a doubt the most widely used material for walkways and paths in America. Despite its apparent lack of charm when compared to the more dazzling options shown here, concrete holds this honor for good reason. It's versatile. It's affordable. It's durable. And it is not difficult for the average homeowner to work with it.

Concrete can be stained almost any color. (The best method is adding stain when mixing the concrete, but commercial stains are available for existing concrete.) You can add texture to concrete while it's drying by using aggregate, such as colored gravel or brushing it with a broom. You can even stamp drying concrete with pre-formed molds to create the effect of brick or cobblestone.

Like I said, it's versatile. However, there is a flip side to using concrete for a garden path. Concrete paths require a fair amount of preparation work. You will need a good

foundation and a form. What this involves is at least an 8 in. deep trench where the path is to go, a wooden form to keep the concrete from spilling outside the confines of the desired path, and at least a 4 in. layer of gravel and reinforcing mesh to keep the concrete together. Plus, this stuff is heavy and takes about ten times more concrete than you'd think to lay a 20 ft. long, 2 ft. wide path. So, you'll want to invite a lot of friends over.

None of this is particularly difficult, but it can be time consuming and, if it is not done properly, you can have problems down the line. Unlike replacing a stone or replacing some mulch or putting in a new paver, if a concrete path starts cracking, you can have a big mess on your hands. The only solution may turn out to be breaking the whole thing up, hauling it away and starting over. Now *there's* a job you want to avoid!



© JOHN GLOVER

Mixed materials

We've talked about a lot of different types of materials so far, but nobody says you have to stick to just one. Mixing materials, such as the cast concrete pavers and gravel in the path shown at right, can create a unique look for the garden.

Should you choose to go this route, try to pick materials that are similar in color and texture. This can become a safety issue if you have a series of coarse-textured material followed by smooth stone. Under wet conditions, the same stride and gait that works where you have good traction could result in a slip if you suddenly encounter a slick surface.



© JOHN GLOVER

Brick and other pavers

This is yet another commonly used material for garden paths. One reason is brick is relatively affordable, yet easier to work with than concrete and just as durable.

I don't mean to imply that making a brick path is easy. Anyone who has tried to lay a perfectly level and evenly patterned brick path — whether on sand or in mortar — knows what I'm talking about. But it's a lot more forgiving than concrete. And because it's a uniform shape, it can be easier to work with than stone. You can move bricks around and build the path a little bit at a time, if you'd like, until you get the hang of it.

Also included in this category is the myriad of precast pavers that are available at garden and home improvement centers. Resembling everything from cobblestone to fieldstone to good old-fashioned brick, there is a color, shape and texture to suit just about any taste. As a general rule, you should plan on spending more money for these types of pavers than you would regular brick.

If you like the look of this material and are a do-it-yourselfer, in the following pages, we'll show you how to build a brick-on-sand pathway.



© JOHN GLOVER



PHOTO: © SUSAN ROTH DESIGN CONNI CROSS

Gravel and the like

Most of us are familiar with the crunch-crunch-crunch of walking down a gravel path. The reason you can probably "hear" the memory is because this is a very popular material.

Gravel and other firm-but-loose materials, such as crushed brick, are almost as easy to work with as mulch but tend to endure better.

You'll need to put in a permanent edging to keep this material in place, and even then, plan on replenishing the gravel from time to time. I think it must go to the same place as my missing socks.

Anyway, this type of path, like mulch and grass, also has the bonus of not impeding the flow of water or growth of roots. About the only downside I can think of is that crunching noise. And women in high heels will have trouble.



© JOHN GLOVER

Wood

You might be skeptical of wood decking as a path material, but it has a lot of appropriate uses.

First of all, it's the material of choice if you have a boggy or wet area to traverse or if you live in an area that receives a lot of rain. With a deck path you won't have to worry about puddle jumping. Wood is also used a lot in coastal areas where a paved path gets covered up with sand rather quickly. Decking is permeable to water, which lets the roots find their path of choice. And it is fairly durable (plan on a lifespan of about 10 and no more than 20 years.) Keep in mind that if you allow algae to grow on the wood it can become extremely slick.

PATHWAY TIPS

Most of this story focuses on the beauty and functions of a path. However, it is important to remember a few safety tips and other ideas when planning the location and material for a path.

Traction — You've probably slipped on a path at one time or another. Avoid having it happen again by paying close attention to the traction your path offers. If your path is too slick when wet, consider using a textured varnish (this product is typically available at home centers). You apply it with a paint brush, and it leaves a thin, gritty coat that provides excellent traction, even when wet.

Keep it level — Next to traction, uneven paths are probably the biggest culprit for trips and spills. If you're the only one using the path and you know exactly where to walk, you'll be fine. But for your guests' sake, smooth out any rough spots.

Steps — If you have any significant level changes to negotiate, consider putting in steps versus sloping the path too steeply. Should you need to put in steps, always plan on having at least two steps. Studies have shown time and again that having a single step is asking for trouble.

Lighting — It may not be practical or necessary, but if a path is going to be used regularly at night (to get to the neighbors, turn off the sprinkler, etc.) you need to keep it well lit. Simple low-voltage lighting is affordable and easy to install.

Drainage — The same path that is inviting to you may also be a natural channel for rainwater runoff. As you plan and build your path, consider whether or not this is a problem. While there's nothing wrong with having a path double as a drainage feature, the two drawbacks are: One, you can't use it when it's raining, and two, runoff can deteriorate the path.



1 Lay out the path — I like to use a hose or rope to mark curved paths. For best results, toss the hose beyond where you want the curve, then “pull” the curve into place. Otherwise, you end up with squiggly lines. You can also use spray paint or sand dribbled from a milk jug. With a line in place, mark it with a shovel or hoe.

Remove the sod —

If you remove sod carefully, you can use it elsewhere in the garden. If you’re in a hurry, just dig it up and throw it on the compost heap. Regardless, this is where you commit to the shape of the path, so follow the lines you established. Periodically check to make sure the width is right, especially on curves.



3 Trench and border — Dig a bed for the path that’s at least 8 in. deep. Trim the edges so they’re vertical. Now, install pre-made plastic edging or use pressure-treated 1x4s. Make sure the inside measurement of the path is wide enough for the pavers and paving pattern you’ve selected. Use stakes to hold the edging in place.

Add sand and gravel —

Add a layer of gravel to the bottom of the trench. If desired, lay a 3 in. drain pipe down the center of the bed. Cover with gravel for a total of 4 in. Add sand on top of the gravel. The sand depth will depend on whether you plan to add a layer of mortar or if the pavers will rest directly on the sand. Level sand with a board.



Building a path

With a good idea about why you want a path, where you want it to go and what material you want to use to make it, it’s time for the fun to begin.

As the preceding pages prove, there are an awful lot of path styles from which to choose. Obviously, we can’t show you how to make them all. What we’ve done is divide the process into two phases.

First, prepare the bed. The step-by-step procedure for this phase is basically the same for any kind of solid material as well as mulch or gravel. Wood and grass, of course, would have to be handled differently since they don’t require a base.

With the bed prepared, you can move into the second phase: putting down your surface. Like I said, we don’t have room in this article to show the step-by-step for all the materials, so we decided to stick to the more popular materials: stone, brick and mulch. And because both stone and brick can be laid on a sand or mortar bed (and the process for both is similar), we’re going to show you how to do brick on sand and stone on mortar.

As you undertake this project, don’t hesitate to consult with a contractor or garden center if you think you’re headed down the wrong path.

Step 1: Lay out the path — Use a hose, rope, sand or paint to mark the desired lines of your path. If you’re going to have a perfectly straight line, you can use strings and stakes.

Width is a personal preference. However, my experience has taught me that anything narrower than 24 in. is going to require most people to really concentrate on the walking and will distract from the garden experience.

Step 2: Remove the sod — If the path is designed to go across a lawn area, use a spade (flat-headed shovel) to cut beneath the sod. If you do this carefully, you can reuse the sod in other parts of the garden. If you have no need for the sod, there’s no need to be careful about cutting it.

Step 3: Dig a trench and put in a border — As a general rule, you’ll want to dig your trench at least 8 in. deep. This will allow you to have a gravel base that is 4 in. deep and then another 4 in. of sand. Make sure the edge of the trench is clean and that the width is right. Remember to account for the thickness of the edging.

If you’re using brick, lay out the pattern you want to use and measure how wide your path will need to be. Add an inch to every foot of width to allow for sand between the bricks.

Now add a border or edging. You can buy plastic edging designed specifically for pathways or, if the curves aren’t too sharp, you can use pressure-treated 1x4s. Regardless of what you use, be sure that the top of the edging is flush with the ground. Use stakes to hold edging in place.

Step 4: Make a base — For all three of the paths we’re showing here, the first part of the base is the same.

Add a thin layer of gravel to the path bed, then place a 3 in. diameter drain pipe down the center of the path, making sure that the holes are facing down. Now cover the pipe with enough gravel so you end up with about a 4 in. layer.

The drain pipe is not absolutely necessary, but it will prolong the life of the path by keeping the base from eroding.

The last step is to put down a sand leveling course. It’s called a leveling course because, with sand, you can move a stone or brick around until it is nested just right.

Measure the thickness of your paver, add 2 in. if you’re using mortar, and subtract that amount from 4 in. to determine the depth of sand you need.

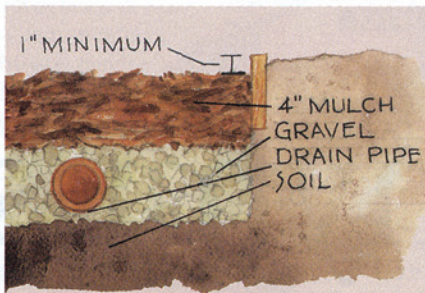
To finish the base, take a 2x4 and shift it back and forth across the sand to create a smooth, level surface. No sand is necessary if you’re using mulch.

Brick on sand

I recommend setting brick on sand. It has a geometric shape, so any errors in placement are readily visible, and sand allows you to adjust placement more easily than concrete. Plus, a sand base can shift without cracking the mortar between the bricks.

If setting brick on sand, level the sand so that a brick set on top of it will be flush with the path edging. Then lay out a desired pattern of brick. You might find that you are in need of odd-sized pieces as you encounter curves in the walk. Should that be the case, you can chip your own brick with a hammer or see if your brick supplier has odd pieces you can have or buy.

Once the brick is in place, sprinkle sand over the entire path and use a broom to sweep it into the cracks.



▲ Mulch cross-section —

If you want a path made of mulch, you should make a base and form hard edges. This will reduce erosion and help keep the mulch in place.

Stone on mortar

I suggest setting solid stone paths in mortar. My reason for this is that stone is not regular in shape and will therefore be a little bit harder to walk on than other surfaces. That said, setting it in mortar eliminates the “wobble” effect. Second, because stone is irregular, it’s less critical to have everything match just right.

To set stone, make sure the sand base is deep enough to allow for the thickest stone to be flush with the top of the edging. Lay out stone in a desired pattern for a 3 ft. length of the path. Spread 1 to 2 in. of mortar over the sand bed and set the stone in place. Pack mortar beneath the rock and between the stones as well. After the mortar has set for an hour, spray gently with a hose to remove any spilled mortar. □

— Todd Steadman

FAKING IT

There’s a neat product on the market that simplifies the process of making a stone path. You fake it by using concrete poured into a form.

All you need to make this kind of path is one of these forms, a bag of pre-mixed concrete, a trowel and water.

Prepare the base the same as shown on the preceding pages. Then mix the concrete (some come with dyes to create a dark gray or buff color), place the form where you want it and fill it with the concrete. Let it set for awhile then lift the mold. You are left with a solid concrete path that has a remarkable resemblance to stone.

Expect to spend about \$3 for a 60 lb. bag of concrete mix and about \$30 for one of the molds. One bag of concrete will cover about a 2 by 2 ft. section of path.

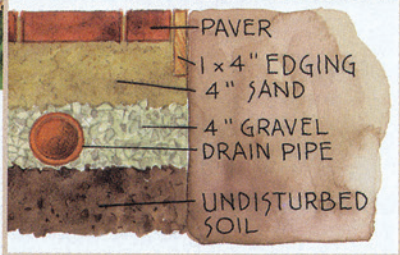
If you have trouble finding these molds at your local home improvement store or garden center, call Quikrete at 800-282-5828.

LAYING THE PAVERS

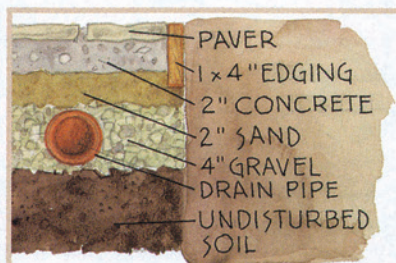


▲ **Brick on sand** — The method shown here works for brick, stone and other pavers. You need a good base and “leveling” course.

Then place the pavers where you want them. Always sweep sand between the cracks once all the pavers are in place. I usually do this at least twice — right after placing the pavers and then again in about a week. If you have easy access to one, you might consider borrowing a water-filled roller to press the pavers into the sand.



▼ **Stone in mortar** — This method works for stone, brick and other paving materials. Because the harshness of winter varies from region to region, check



with a municipal building inspector for the recommended mortar. Keep a scrub brush, rag and bucket of water handy to help keep the stone free of any unwanted mortar.

