**Weekly Express-News Article**

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**“Do It Yourself Hardscape”**

One of the best ways to reduce water needs on your landscape is to replace some of the lawn area with hardscape, especially hardscape that allows water to penetrate into the soil.

The hardscape provides a work and play area that can be very attractive, without requiring all the water and lawn work associated with grass. Some materials to consider are brick without mortar, flagstone, patio blocks, and decomposed granite.

To view rock materials that are available visit hardscape suppliers like Keller Materials, Fertile Garden Supply or Quality Organic Products. They have exhibits of various options, you can also visit a brick supplier for ideas. . There are also books and pamphlets on the topic with illustrations to show you each step. “Texas Landscaping” by Greg Grant and Roger Holmes is one such book. Your favorite nursery and the big box stores also have the “How to” Guides.

Brick without mortar makes a very attractive surface that is easy to walk on or on which to use wheeled apparatus like wheelchairs or tricycles. Border the brick walk with treated wood two-by-fours for straight stretches and flexible steel or cedar pieces for curves. You want the brick to be tight together so the width should be divisible by the width of the brick surface. A good width is 36 inches if the brick is three inches on the side to form your surface.

Patio blocks can be used the same way as bricks. I believe the surface is less attractive but the blocks are easier to lay.

If you use flagstone or slate materials for the path or patio the surface will not be as level as the brick or patio blocks and there will necessarily be space between the rocks. The overall look will also be less formal.

Decomposed granite should be applied to a caliche base about two inches deep. It should be tamped with a rented compactor with a vibratory plate tamper or roller, or you could build a homemade tamper by nailing four one-foot pieces of four-by-four on a four foot four-by-four post.

Patio surfaces can be higher than the surrounding beds and or lawn but for ease of mowing, the paths or sidewalks seem to work best if they are level with the lawn. To accomplish that the route of the path will have to be dug out to accommodate the three inches of sand or two inches of caliche plus the depth of the surface material.

The first step in such a project is to plan the work. I like to put it down on paper.

Use your garden hose and a paint marker to mark the area to be dug out. Include enough space to incorporate the two-by-four border. The soil removed can be spread over the yard or used to fill low spots in the landscape.

After the plan is completed and has passed muster with the usual review authorities – always a spouse and sometimes your neighborhood association, you can begin digging.

The sand provides a stable, accommodating base for the bricks, flagstone, and other surface materials to set upon. It can be easily leveled. Decomposed granite does better on a base of two inches of caliche fill.

The brick, patio block, and especially the flagstone do not need to be perfectly level but you can use a level to check the path as you proceed, or even use a straight piece of two-by-four that when laid on your border will show you if the path is relatively level. The brick and other material should just touch the bridging two-by-four.

Drainage off the path should not be a problem if it is level or slightly higher than the surrounding beds or lawn. You can allow for a small slope (one inch or less) across the path.

If you decide to eliminate a larger portion of the lawn in favor of a low water use landscape to go along with your hardscape, a good strategy would be to kill the grass with glyphosplate. Put in the paths and patio and then apply a four to six inch layer of shredded brush or other attractive but inexpensive mulch to cover the killed lawn. Planting of perennials, shrubs, and more shade trees can then be done as your budget allows. SAWS customers may be eligible for financial incentives for such a conversion. Visit the SAWS website at “[www.saws.org](http://www.saws.org)” for more information.