



## Make Your Yard More Exciting With 'Hardscaping'

*Learn tips for adding walking paths, steps, walls, raised planting beds, and/or a patio space to your yard.*

If you're eager to bring some excitement into your yard, consider focusing your efforts this spring on non-plant aspects. Below are tips for common projects.

### Walking paths

No matter whether it crosses your yard in a straight line or slowly curves around planted beds, a path will open up your landscaping and make it feel far more inviting.

- Make primary paths (those that connect high-traffic areas) at least three feet wide.
- Instead of stopping a path once it reaches the lawn or a planting bed, extend it slightly to make the transition less abrupt.
- Curves invite walkers to continue on, and create a sense that your yard is larger than it really is.
- To keep a crushed-rock pathway from filling with weeds or potholes, you must excavate to a depth of at least six inches, then install landscape fabric and layers of well-compacted gravel.

### Stairs and steps

Steps in the outdoors not only make it easier to get around your property, they also add visual intrigue to gentle slopes and rises.

- Landscape steps should be wider than indoor stairs, because everything looks smaller in the great outdoors, and the surrounding plants are prone to crowding in.
- When steps are cut into a steep slope, it may be necessary to add a retaining wall along the sides. Consider using those walls as a start for planting beds.
- Add lighting along steps whenever possible (for safety, and to add more nighttime drama).

### Garden walls

Walls can be used to hold back a hillside, terrace a planting area, create casual seating, define boundaries, add visual interest, and separate spaces.

- Keep walls as low as possible to encourage an open, airy feel, and to maintain your views.
- Any wall over four feet tall requires professional engineering and a building permit. The Club's contractors have proven very adept at designing lower walls that still suit the need (and avoid those extra expenses, steps, and delays).
- Gabion walls (wire surrounds filled with stones) are an af-

fordable option that provide plenty of character, as well as retaining strength.

- To cut costs, consider keeping the length of a wall to a minimum, then extending the look with shrubs or fencing.



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### Patio space

A patio provides the perfect outdoor space for hosting parties, enjoying dinner or drinks, or just surrounding yourself with nature.

- If you'll be using the space for outdoor dining, consider concrete or another solid floor surface so table and chair legs can rest firmly. Concrete can be poured into shapes or stamped with a pattern to simulate the look of stone and reduce costs.
- While small patios have their place, larger spaces often look better and allow more flexibility in how they're used.
- For visual consistency, use the same material for any paths leading to the patio. As a complimentary contrast, use a different type of material for any surrounding walls.

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# Fun Facts About the Club You Can Share

*There are lots of good reasons to belong to Home Owners Club. Here are 10 things that make the Club a unique resource.*

## 1. The Club doesn't sell job leads

With other referral services, job leads may be doled out to whichever contractor is willing to pay for them. That's not the case with the Club. In fact, the Club is not obligated in any way to provide contractors with referrals. Instead, experienced Club staff personally review each member request and then select the best Club-authorized contractor(s) for the job. We consider proven skills, years of experience, licensing, workmanship, pricing, past performance, and a variety of other factors. The Club also doesn't accept any contractor advertising. It is, quite simply, an independent, objective, member-focused referral service.

## 2. You choose how to communicate with the Club

As a Club member, you can communicate with our team online, by phone, or in person. We're not an online-only service, so you are free to communicate the details of your projects in the way that works for you. The Club follows your job through to completion, and we offer an after-hours answering service to help with emergency repairs. You get attentive, personalized customer service, and that's an important benefit of your Club membership.

## 3. Fair pricing

The Club monitors rates for a variety of projects to ensure our contractors' prices are competitive, fair, and reasonable. Each of our contractors signs an agreement with the Club stating they will "perform all work referred by the Club at current, competitive prices ...." In short, know that when you use Club services you'll be charged the contractor's regular hourly rates.

## 4. Access to lots of contractors

The Club has authorized contractors who can help with virtually everything related to repairs, upkeep, and modernization for a home and its surroundings. For smaller jobs and emergency repairs where prompt service is the top priority, the Club will dispatch one contractor to handle the project. For major projects—like painting, remodeling, or installing a new roof or flooring—the Club can arrange for multiple contractors to bid on the work.

## 5. Every contractor is screened

To be considered for Club referrals, a contractor must have been in business for at least three years and have a solid record of performance. Contractors must successfully

pass an in-house screening process before the Club begins recommending them for appropriate projects. That process is repeated annually and includes reviewing work history, checking for required insurance coverages, ensuring required licensing is current, confirming the business is financially stable, and checking for claims against the contractor's bond.

## 6. The Club's field representative is standing by

Members can consult with the Club's field representative on any project, large or small, and get help comparing contractor bids, all at no extra charge.

## 7. Contractor guarantees are guaranteed

We honor any contractor's guarantee on work completed through the Home Owners Club—even if the contractor retires or goes out of business.

## 8. The Club's process protects you from contractor scams

Unfortunately, unethical contractors are always looking for new victims. Sometimes they pretend to have materials left over from another job. Another scam: Contractors who say they want to use your house as a showplace for a new product. Members are able to avoid these and other ploys by working with the Club—where all the contractors are thoroughly vetted and carefully monitored.

## 9. Your personal information is kept confidential

Club members can take comfort in knowing that any personally identifiable information will be securely stored and kept strictly confidential. None of the information provided when applying for membership is ever sold or given to any outside party. Only Club staff and the contractors you work with have access to your contact information.

## 10. Satisfaction is guaranteed

Thanks to the Club's prudent billing process (you pay the Club, the Club pays the contractor), you have time to ensure work is done to your satisfaction before final payment is made. After a job is completed, your contractor will send an invoice to the Club. We'll review the bill, then contact you to make sure you're satisfied with the work and the service provided. If you're not happy, we'll work to ensure the situation is remedied to your satisfaction. After more than 60 years in business and tens of thousands of completed jobs, Better Business Bureau records show the Club has never had an unresolved complaint.

We hope you're leveraging all the advantages of your Home Owners Club membership, and we hope you'll tell your friends and family about them.







Karen Anderson

## Mac & Cheese Memories

It was a cold, rainy afternoon in Seattle (imagine that!) and the perfect day for a nice mac & cheese dinner. I had no trouble finding several cooking websites

with mouth-watering pictures of what they called “classic homestyle mac & cheese.” But when I clicked through to the actual recipes, they were full of complicated directions and esoteric ingredients. Lobster? Chanterelle mushrooms? Three types of cheese? Sourdough breadcrumbs in garlic butter?

This is not my idea of “comfort food.” Not if I’m the one cooking it. And classic? Hardly.

### Back to basics

It occurred to me that the sensible place to look for a real classic mac & cheese recipe would be in a classic cookbook. It just so happens that I have the 1970s-era *Betty Crocker’s Cookbook*. I took the faded orange volume down from the shelf and began leafing through it.

It was a college graduation gift from my mom’s friend Brenda. The book covers all the basics, which made it perfect for someone encountering their first kitchen. (It also would have been perfect for Brenda, who was renowned for serving TV dinners. I now suspect her desperate husband had given it to her, and she was retaliating by re-gifting it).

Armed with that first cookbook, I mastered three recipes—vegetable soup, omelets, and chicken in white wine. Simple enough, but still fairly challenging if you are living in graduate student quarters with a battered electric stove (two burners worked), hardly any counterspace, and a tiny sink.

### Expanding horizons

The stove situation got even worse when my first job as a newspaper reporter found me living in a dilapidated house in a New England factory town. The gas stove was so ancient that it was also the heater for the apartment. When the heater broke (on a snowy winter morning, of course) the gas company had to summon a repairman out of retirement because he was the only person who knew how to fix it.

By then, I had cookbooks for the 1980s: *Laurel’s*

*Kitchen* for the health conscious and Chef Paul Prudhomme’s *Louisiana Kitchen* for those of us young enough to be in complete denial about cholesterol.

I also had *The Romagnoli’s Table*, which I took with me on my year in Italy. A wonderful collection of homestyle Italian recipes, it failed me only once—the night I set out to prepare roast pig for a dozen visiting relatives and in-laws. The butcher shop had run out of pork, and I wound up with a wild boar. Lacking a recipe for boar, I winged it. To this day when I go into the kitchen to make dinner, my mother inquires helpfully, “Is this going to take as long as that wild boar?”

### Containing a collection

On my return from Italy, I bought a Craftsman bungalow in Wallingford. Unfortunately, I couldn’t resist buying a 1930s vintage stove to go with it. The stove had absolutely no modern safety features, but it looked spectacular and the oven went up to 600 degrees—perfect for the pizzas I’d learned to spin!

With a whole house to fill and a functional stove, my cookbook collection got out of control. Not to mention those piles of *Martha Stewart Living* magazines.

When I moved to my house in Ballard, it had the ideal kitchen for me—an unremodeled one. We gutted it, and the new kitchen included the gas stove of my dreams. The kitchen also had a feature designed to put a lid on my cookbook collecting: A small bookshelf. This forced me to prune my cookbooks down to a favorite 30 or so, including the beloved Betty Crocker that started it all.



### A great recipe

I leafed through the yellowed pages until I found Betty’s recipe for mac & cheese. It uses cooked elbow macaroni in a sauce of flour, butter, milk, and sharp American cheese. Add grated onion, salt, and pepper. Bake. What could be simpler, or more delicious?

“I’ve found a great mac & cheese recipe!” I yelled to The Scholarly Gentleman when I heard him coming through the front door.

“That’s great,” he said. “But this,” he came into the kitchen and plopped a hot pizza on the kitchen table, “is a lot faster.”

My mother must have warned him about that wild boar.



### **Raised planting beds**

Raised beds are popular for growing vegetables and are a great solution for areas of your yard with soil and/or drainage problems. They provide visual interest and allow slopes to be planted. Plus, gardeners with knee and back pain love them.

■ If you think you may need or want to move the bed in the future, construct it with stone, which is easy to disassemble.

■ Install a layer of hardware cloth underneath the bed to deter moles and other pests that burrow up from below.

Want more ideas and insights? The Club can connect you with a hardscape specialist or landscape designer. Don't wait—spring and summer work schedules can fill up fast.



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through Friday, excluding holidays.  
After-hours, your phone call will  
be handled by trained operators at  
the Club's answering service.

**CALL:**  
(206) 622-3500

**CLICK:**  
[homeownersclub.org](http://homeownersclub.org)

**E-MAIL:**  
[staff@homeownersclub.org](mailto:staff@homeownersclub.org)

## *Spring Home-maintenance Tasks*

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Spring house cleaning.  | <input type="checkbox"/> Pressure spray decks, patios, and driveways to remove moss and fungus. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Window washing.   |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clean blinds.   | <input type="checkbox"/> Remove any branches or debris on roof.                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clean carpets and upholstery.                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Lawn fertilization, moss retardant, liming, aeration, and thatching.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Change or clean furnace filters.                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Shrub planting.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Check for damage to exterior faucets.                               | <input type="checkbox"/> Spray plants and trees for bugs and disease.                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clean automatic sprinkler heads and check system for winter damage. |   |