



Walkways in Design

By Steve Chepurny*

Walkways and or pathways require careful consideration when contemplating an entrance approach or a simple means of egress to a point of interest or activity. A path that is too long immediately will give the impression to your guests as overwhelming and uncomfortable. We all appreciate curb appeal, and the entrance walk is the first approach or perhaps the exterior hallway to a property. A comfortable walk that takes into account the average person's stride and how steps are carefully integrated into the journey are critical components in a person's perception of a home. Often steps are carelessly placed and blind spots exist, which creates an internal sense of discomfort. Human nature wants to have a firm understanding of how to get from point "A" to point "B" with a sense of ease, safety and most of all comfort.

Lighting is a critical component to make the journey safe and enjoyable. It's best to avoid hot spots in lighting unless safety is a critical concern. An entrance lamppost with an address posted can create a sense of identity while providing a quaint feel to the property. When possible, integrate soft lighting from above, possibly mounted 25' to 35' high in a tree to create a soft moonlight feel with dappled shadows as soft accents. If mature trees don't exist, try mounting low profile lights in the soffit of the home, which can be directed to guide a person along the walk. It's important to have the light vary in intensity from very soft to brighter where needed at points of interest or change of grade. Avoid the runway effect at all costs, however, which means far too much lighting. If energy efficiency is desired, try using an LED lighting system, which has a tremendous lamp life expectancy and very low energy consumption. However, the initial cost can add 15 percent to 25 percent to the cost of project, but it's less expensive in the long run.

Balance is key to deciding the width of a walk, and should take into consideration the house first, property size second and lastly the surrounding landscape. There is no right or wrong choice, but a feeling of comfort within the space is the desired goal. Typically, I recommended width of a walk should be no less than 48" for two people comfortably and should expand or vary in width at points of congregation, entrance ways, or points of interest. A change in material selection at the entrance or point of interest is a great way to create some diversity in the walk and pattern. I typically recommend the walk entrance be approximately 6' to 8' and gradually taper to a width of no less than 4'.

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Drainage should also be a careful consideration in designing a walk. If the walk collects or holds water after a rain, it's been poorly designed. Often flower beds line a walk with little consideration on how to move water off of the walk. This problem can turn very quickly into a liability for the homeowner and landscape architect or designer if the water freezes and ices over in the winter. Deicers can be used but often will quickly degrade a surface, including concrete, if used in excess. Landscape and plantings can abut a path and add tremendous interest if sited appropriately to accommodate water runoff without impeding site lines. A surface with some texture will always perform better in both rain and snow than a product that's smooth with little texture.

The choice of the material is yet another critical design factor in any walkway. I typically like to have the walkway integrated with the architectural materials that are used on the home. If integration isn't possible, a product that has a soft compliment as opposed to a glaring contrast will typically create a pleasant approach with a sense of visual pleasure to those strolling. In choosing and selecting materials, favor local stone products such as bluestone or a classic brick. Natural materials are often timeless and the best choices. Some good examples: Clay brick is offered in a multitude of color ranges and styles so it adds a warm feel to any path; concrete pavers offer great selections in size, colors, and texture. Cost and budget always plays a critical component in selection. A typical walk in concrete pavers can average about \$15 per square foot to \$16 under normal conditions. Clay products are typically in line with concrete products. Natural stones may cost anywhere from \$2 a square foot to \$4 in addition to pavers. Having a budget upfront is key! You don't want to waste time considering products that are just too expensive or high maintenance. A knowledgeable landscape architect or designer will help you navigate through this maze. By the same token, don't settle for a product that won't achieve all the above needs and possibly become a negative down the road. Wait, if need be, until your budget affords the proper designer, material and installation contractor.

Always consult a licensed professional to design and construct your walk. It's the first approach to your home and will add character and warmth for years to come. A carefully blended walk with flowering shrubs, perennials, grasses and perhaps a small water feature will incorporate a harmonious path in your yard that will bring visitors to your door or patio with a big smile.

*Steve Chepurny, CLA, ASLA, is president of Beechwood Landscape Architecture & Construction, LLC in Southampton, N.J. For questions about walkways, contact Steve at Steve@beechwoodlandscape.com, www.beechwoodlandscape.com.