

Patio In Your Future? Start Planning Now

EAST LANSING — Whether you want to build a new patio or modify an existing one, plan for it now, says Joe Cox, landscape architect at Michigan State University.

If a patio is in your plans, there are a number of decisions to make.

LOCATION: Where will your family find a patio most useful? Choice of location is influenced by accessibility, privacy, protection from the weather and the available shade.

For all-season use Cox recommends a patio with a southern exposure. An area with a northern or northeastern exposure offers the most dependable shade for summer use, while a patio on the west side of the house will be open to the afternoon and evening sun.

When a sunny location is the only possibility, lattice or wooden screen fences, awnings or shade trees can be used to provide shade and privacy.

MATERIALS: What you will resist to spend is a major factor, Cox says. Concrete is one of the least expensive materials you can use, he notes, but for the inexperienced beginner it's advisable to hire professionals to pour and level it.

Weather-glazed brick is easier to put down but it's expensive and absorbs oil and fat stains.

Gravel, limestone chips, crushed brick, tanbark and sawdust are easy to use and economical, but they are uncomfortable to walk on and they require constant upkeep because weeds grow through them. They also tend to find their way into lawns and flower beds, Cox observes.

Whatever materials you choose, the surface should be essentially level with the floor of the room opening onto it, he says. Half-steps up and down are a safety hazard. If the patio is six inches or more below floor level, it will require a landing, steps and a rail.

SIZE AND SHAPE: Make your patio as large or larger than your living room.

Most patios are rectangular. So are many houses. Varying the shape of the patio with curved borders or interesting angles can break up what otherwise could be a monotonous repetition of the same shape, Cox suggests.

Don't neglect planning the placement of plant materials, Cox says. Judicious use of plants can help blend your patio into its natural setting and create a rustic, peaceful mood even in the heart of town.

So plan now, he urges. Make some sketches, move things around on paper, and test your ideas on location. Size and shape may be better evaluated by putting out a few stakes and living with them for a while. Remember, he notes, it's a lot easier to go "back to the drawing board" before you've torn up your lawn.

Guards Protect Trees From Rodent Attack

Act now to prevent rabbits and mice from ruining your ornamental plants and fruit trees this winter, advises Douglas M. Jones, Michigan State University horticulturist.

Easily constructed tree guards will discourage rodents from stripping the bark from the trunk or stems of your trees, says Jones. Bark removal, known as girdling, can kill a tree.

To build a tree guard, circle the base of the tree with one-fourth inch mesh hardware cloth. Set the mesh three or four inches in the ground and make sure that it extends well above the snow line.

In most areas, an 18-inch guard will suffice, but if the snow drifts or reaches unusual depth, the guard should be extended to prevent rabbits from reaching over the top to feed, Jones cautions.

A homemade chemical repellent offers additional protection from rabbits. Dissolve seven pounds of inexpensive pulverized rosin in a gallon of commercial denatured ethyl alcohol. The rosin will dissolve in about 24 hours if the container is kept in a warm area and shaken occasionally.

Do not apply heat and avoid contamination with water. Apply this repellent to the dry bark of the tree to about two feet above the snow line. This repellent will remain effective throughout the season.

Mice prefer to feed and rest under a cover of vegetation, Jones adds. Removing the cover around the plants will help discourage mice from feeding.

Bare Branches Permit Study Of Structure

To some people, falling leaves mean it's time to rake the lawn again.

To Joe Cox, landscape architect specialist at Michigan State University, they mean a chance to observe and perhaps improve the structural characteristics of landscape plants.

Falling leaves call attention to branching systems, unique trunks and bark, persistent fruit and multiple stems, Cox notes.

Small trees and large shrubs already in your landscape design may be carefully trimmed so that overabundant branches no longer conceal the true structural beauty of the plant.

Be careful to retain the individuality of the plants' natural habits of growth, Cox advises, whether horizontal, upright or fan-shaped.

If you are considering adding new shrubs and trees to the landscape, Cox suggests you might seek the decorative effect of multiple-stem plants, maple, ash, and crabapple.



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FIX-IT TIP

Frozen water pipes should be thawed slowly. Fast thawing causes steam to form at one point, causing bursting. For this reason, and so as not to cause fire hazards, do not use a blowtorch. Heat lamps, hair dryers, heating cable, light bulbs can be pressed into service. Move the heat along the pipe. Work close to the faucet at the opposite end from the shut-off valve. Keep the faucet open, so the water can flow as the ice melts.

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