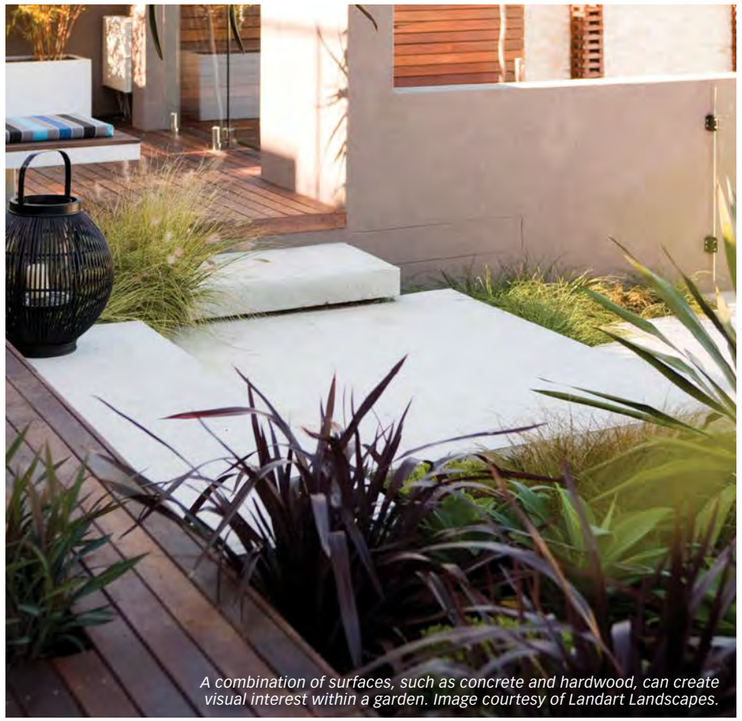
hard surfaces

CHOOSING THE RIGHT MATERIALS FOR YOUR LANDSCAPE

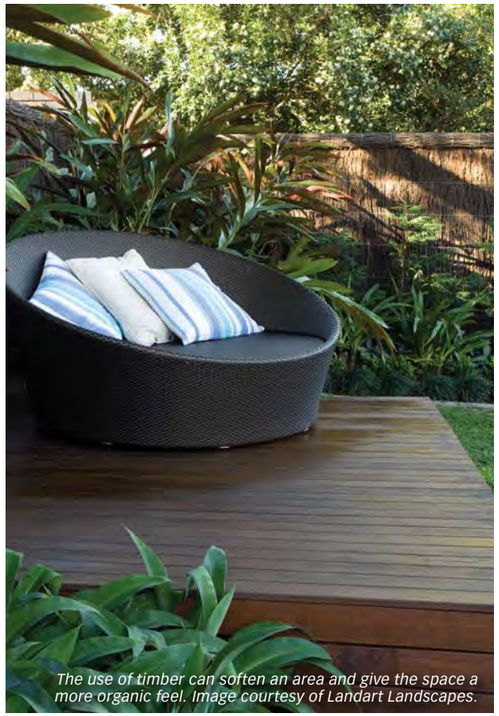
WRITTEN BY MATT LEACY

Adding interesting hard surfaces in and around your garden is an important element of design and is also very functional. Matt Leacy introduces us to a few different materials you can choose from.

Pure white Australian sandstone can have a striking effect in the garden. Image courtesy of Landart Landscapes.



A combination of surfaces, such as concrete and hardwood, can create visual interest within a garden. Image courtesy of Landart Landscapes.



The use of timber can soften an area and give the space a more organic feel. Image courtesy of Landart Landscapes.

Deciding on the right hard surface for your landscape can be extremely challenging. Considering the impact it can have on the overall ambience of the garden, as well as the range of materials to choose from, it is little wonder why.

Whether you choose a paver, tile, natural stone or decking, any hard surface will contribute significantly to the light, feel and look of your space. Some will reflect light, while others will absorb it. Some will feel cold underfoot, others softer and quite warm. The colour and texture of your retaining walls and surrounding landscape will also govern your final decision. As a general rule, if you have a darker area, you may want to use a light coloured stone to reflect the light and give the area a visual lift. If you have an area in full sun that is bright, you may want to use a darker stone to reduce the glare.

We are very lucky to have so many materials to choose from, but this can make it difficult to decide what to use and to know whether your choice will work. It's essential that you get advice from a landscape designer or speak to your local suppliers to understand the product you're considering using, as the different laying specifications and maintenance will have an impact on your long-term costs. However, here are a few tips to help you get started.

CONCRETE > This is one of my favourite materials, as it is the most versatile. You can do just about anything with concrete, including walls, seats, planters, bench tops, feature screens, steppers - the list goes on. The finishes and colours are as abundant as the uses, and you can even use different aggregates to change the texture and alter the contrasting colour.

If you are using concrete for flooring, the above still applies, however you can also form the concrete to any size you want. If you wanted a stepping stone two metres by two metres, for example, you could do it. You can choose different finishes too, such as polished, off form, brushed, floated and acid washed. When you consider that most tiles or paving need a concrete base to lay them on, why not do one surface and potentially save yourself some money?

TIMBER > Timber is a beautiful way to soften an area. Its different hues provide a more organic feel to a space and its variety of sizes enable it to both tie to, and suit, most spaces. Choose the timber colour that appeals to you the most, being sure to look at a sample with the coating or oil you are planning to use. This will be a true indication of the final finish.

Recycled timber can have interesting imperfections that tell a story and bring a sense of history with it. The sizing will vary a little from the standard, but this enables you to get more creative and work outside the normal realms. Recycled timber can be more expensive, however you're also minimising your carbon footprint.

All timber will move in some way, so I would advise that you screw fix it so you are not out there on your hands and knees trying to bash the nails ▶

“ Whether you choose a paver, tile, natural stone or decking, any hard surface will contribute significantly to the light, feel and look of your space. Some will reflect light, while others will absorb it.

back in a few years later. Be sure that whatever timber you choose meets the Australian Forestry Standard and that it is sourced from renewable sources or regrowth forests.

SANDSTONE > There are loads of different sandstones on the market from all over the world, which impacts pricing and quality. It is easy to think that you are saving money because you picked up some sandstone for $50 per square metre, but this not always the case, depending on where it is from.

In some parts of the world, the stone is cut by hand, which can mean that it is delivered with variances in thickness. This makes it harder to lay, so what you save on stone, you pay for in labour.

Australian sandstone is a beautiful stone to use as paving. It can be pure white or have some banding, which makes for some really interesting finishes. Many people don't know this, but you can choose the colouring you want. Australian sandstone is a very porous stone and can be more susceptible to staining than other surfaces, so make sure you apply a good sealer.

TRAVERTINE > Travertine is a fantastic choice because the stone is so dense. This means that it is less likely to soak up any stains and, if laid in full sun, it remains quite cool underfoot. This is a real benefit around pools.

There are many different travertines from around the world, ranging in colours from almost white to more cappuccino in colour with deeper tones. It can be tumbled so it has rustic edges, or sawn if you want a sharper look. You can also alter its appearance slightly by filling the honeycomb indents that occur naturally. It is a very versatile, hard wearing stone than can adapt to most designs and situations.

LIMESTONE > Limestone can be similar to travertine in its overall feel and there are so many different styles, colours and types from around the world and locally. Some can be quite susceptible to staining, so be careful which ones you choose and make sure you purchase them from a reputable supplier.

CONCRETE PAVERS > There are some beautiful concrete pavers on the market now that look quite striking when laid. They come in just about any colour you can think of, so you are not limited in any way. The range in sizing is also one of the best for hard surfaces. Some concrete pavers come with corner pool coping pieces as a standard format, which can lower your labour cost for installation.

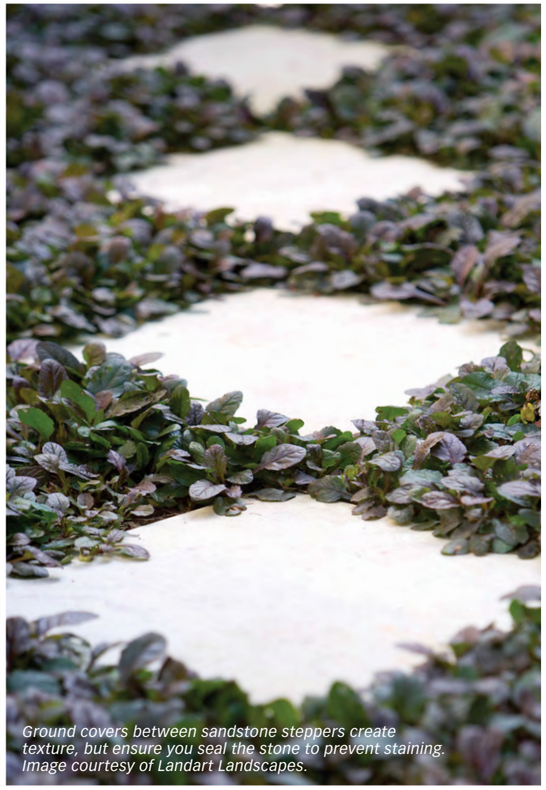
Make sure there is a good seal between your sub-base and the paver, as you do not want salts coming up from beneath and leaving an efflorescence marking around your paving.

BLUESTONE > When laid as flooring, bluestone can produce a sharp finish with a touch more mystique than the lighter stones. Its natural imperfections (called 'cats paws' or 'honeycomb') are what make it all the more attractive. Bluestone works well laid straight, as crazy paving or irregular stepping stones with plantings between them, as the dark tones in the stone create an amazing contrast to the foliage. It will reduce the glare factor, but does get quite hot underfoot.

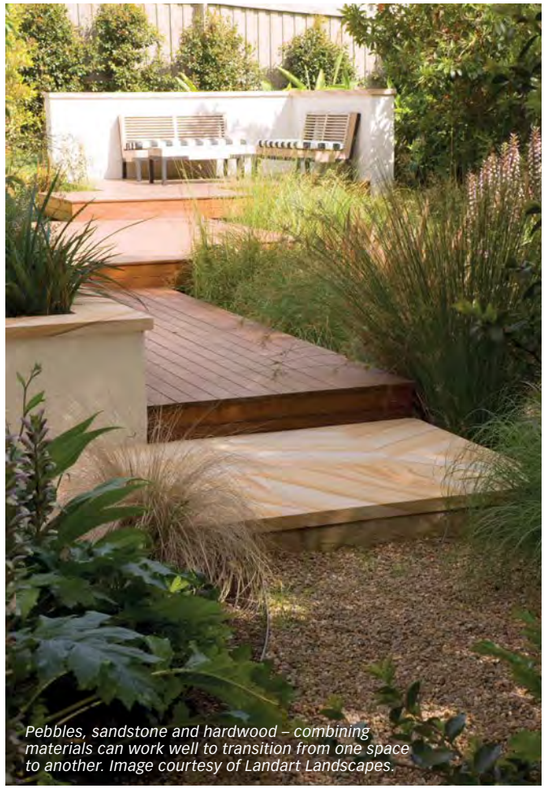
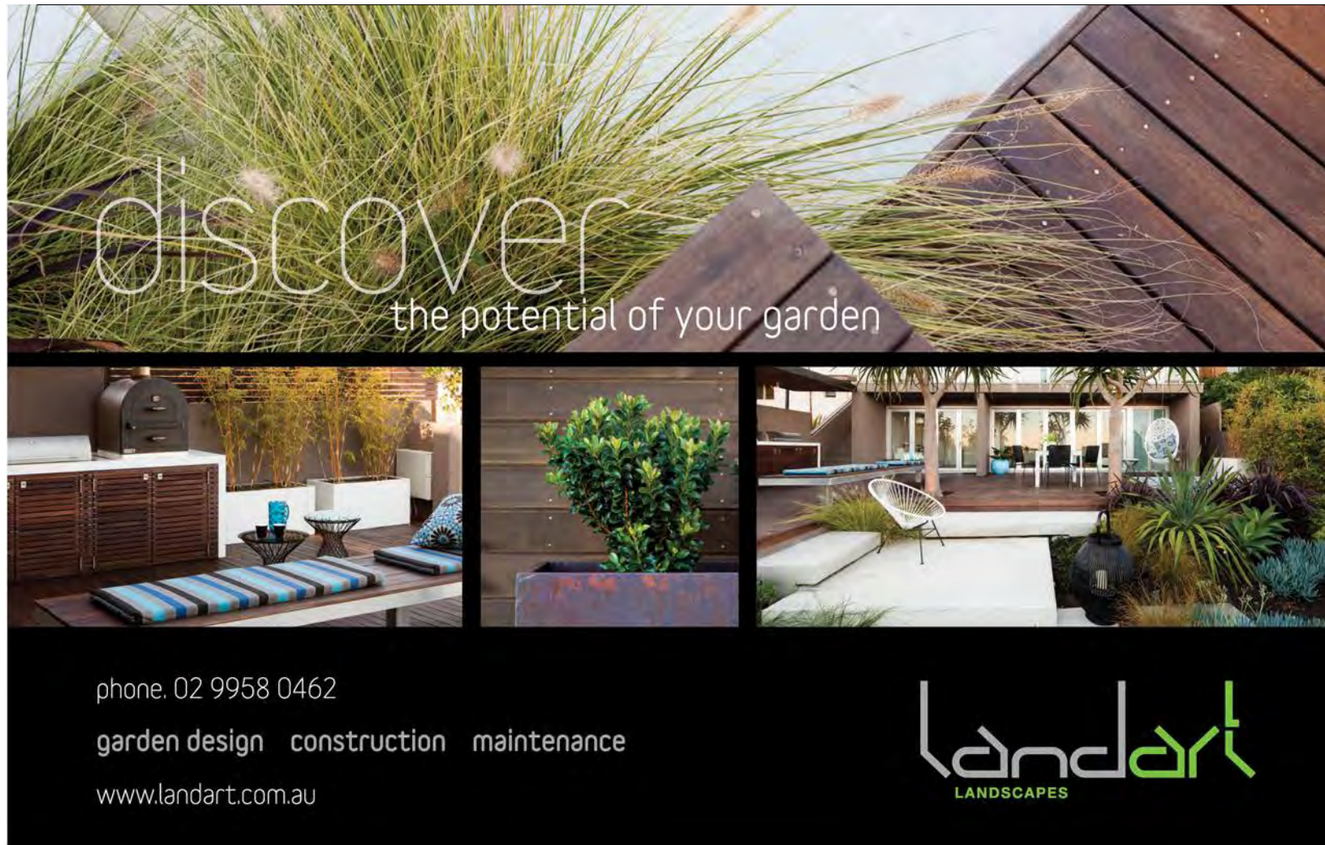
TOPPINGS & DECOMPOSED GRANITES > Toppings and decomposed granites are a great way to achieve a natural looking path. Some are made up of decomposed stone, which is spread and compacted like road base it then set as a solid foundation. It can be a fantastic transition between two surfaces and can be planted in or around, lending it to many different uses.

GRAVEL > Gravel is also a great way to break up or soften a hard surface. It can create an interesting path or open space with plantings and is very versatile. Gravel can also work well in conjunction with other materials, such as stepping stones.

Limestone is great around pool areas, as it remains quite cool underfoot. Image courtesy of Landart Landscapes



Ground covers between sandstone steppers create texture, but ensure you seal the stone to prevent staining. Image courtesy of Landart Landscapes.



Pebbles, sandstone and hardwood – combining materials can work well to transition from one space to another. Image courtesy of Landart Landscapes.