

Natural Stone and NATURALISTIC GARDENS

James Scott describes why natural stone, and naturalistic gardens make the perfect pair

Naturalistic gardens continue to shape contemporary residential landscape design. Defined by informal planting, greater biodiversity and a stronger connection to nature, they often contain less hard landscaping than traditional schemes. Yet the hard landscaping they do contain plays an even more important role. Every terrace, paved surface and path must provide structure, guide movement and create a coherent framework. Material choice is therefore crucial, with natural stone particularly well suited to planting-led landscapes thanks to its authenticity, subtle variation and ability to age gracefully.

At the heart of every successful naturalistic garden is a careful balance between planting and hard landscaping. While planting brings colour, movement and seasonal interest, natural stone provides structure, permanence and a sense of place. Together, they create landscapes that feel both natural and purposeful.

The aim is not to minimise hard landscaping, but design it carefully. Although naturalistic gardens may contain less paving, achieving the right balance often requires greater investment in materials, detailing and planting to deliver an effective, enduring result.

Every project begins with understanding

how clients want to use their garden. Only then can the extent of hard landscaping be determined. For example, terraces should be sized around activities, furniture and circulation rather than simply filling available space. A dining terrace need only be large enough to accommodate its intended use.

Why natural stone works so well

As planting becomes more expressive, hard landscaping should become quieter. Its role is to provide structure, durability and coherence, allowing the planting to take centre stage without sacrificing functionality.

Natural stone works well because its subtle variation in colour, texture and character sits comfortably alongside planting-led schemes, while its ability to weather and develop a natural patina helps it to age gracefully. In the Chilterns, for example (where our business carries out many projects), limestone often complements the local chalk landscape, while Yorkstone continues to offer a timeless choice.

Ideally, materials should feel rooted in their surroundings. Local and vernacular stone can create a stronger sense of place, but specification decisions are rarely straightforward. Designers often balance beauty, performance, sustainability and budget, and these priorities do not always align. While local stone may offer environmental and contextual benefits, availability can be limited and costs higher than imported stones.

In naturalistic gardens, where hard landscaping is often used more sparingly, every material choice carries greater weight. Well-specified stone provides a calm, understated backdrop that enhances the planting rather than competing with it. With fewer paved areas overall, clients can often focus their investment on higher-quality materials that deliver greater longevity, authenticity and long-term value.

Careful specification

Sustainability should be part of every specification, but achieving sustainable outcomes requires informed decision-making rather than simple rules. The most sustainable choice is not always the most obvious. Designers must weigh environmental impact alongside longevity, maintenance, functionality, aesthetics and cost.



Where possible, I favour retaining existing materials, reusing stone on site and sourcing locally. These approaches can reduce embodied carbon while strengthening a garden's connection to its setting. However, they are not always practical or affordable, which is why material selection often becomes an exercise in balancing priorities rather than pursuing a single objective. Tools such as Elemental help designers make informed decisions by quantifying a project's environmental footprint and comparing specification choices.

Aggregates also play an important role in naturalistic gardens. Local gravels can provide permeable pathways, informal seating areas and driveways that sit comfortably within planting-led landscapes. Increasingly, gravels are being combined with mineral mulches to soften the transition between hard and soft landscaping, creating a more seamless visual connection between paving and planting. This approach also allows a gradual hierarchy of aggregate sizes across a scheme, helping hard landscape elements feel more integrated.

Ultimately, sustainable specification is about making informed, balanced choices. The goal is to create landscapes that are beautiful, functional, sustainable and deliver lasting value.

Case study: Cliveden's Long Garden

One recent project that illustrates this approach is the Long Garden at the National Trust's Cliveden estate. Our challenge was not to recreate the past, but to evolve it. This required every design decision to balance heritage

with future resilience. The redesigned garden replaces high-maintenance seasonal bedding with climate-resilient planting, delivering year-round interest and enhancing biodiversity. The hard landscaping plays an equally important supporting role. Replacing artificial grass

pathways with Yorkstone has improved accessibility while providing a

calm, understated framework that allows planting and historic sculptures to remain the focus.

For this project we selected Appleby Stone from Allgreen.

The value of specialist suppliers

Knowledgeable suppliers are invaluable. Long-term relationships with specialist stone suppliers often lead to better

specification decisions, access to unique materials and practical solutions that might otherwise be overlooked. In naturalistic gardens, where hard landscaping is expected to perform for decades, that expertise can make all the difference.

Conclusion

Naturalistic gardens may be planting-led, but they are not planting-only. Successful schemes depend on a balance between soft and hard landscaping. As planting becomes more immersive and paving is used selectively, the quality of hard landscaping matters more, not less. Natural stone provides the enduring framework that allows naturalistic gardens to mature well. When hard landscaping takes a quieter role, its quality often determines the garden's long-term success.



JAMES SCOTT

James Scott FSGDL MBALI is managing director and principal designer at The Garden Company. He is an Accreditor for the Society of Garden and Landscape Designers and Head Judge for the SGLD Design Awards. He also serves on the judging panel for Pro Landscaper Project Awards. thegardenco.co.uk

Pro Landscaper's PICKS



CED Stone

Product: Banded Gneiss Paving
Price: £87.55/m2



Lowell Stone Group

Product: Purbeck Ragstone Paving
Price: POA



Allgreen

Product: Zahra Beige Mallets
Price: £68 per m2 + VAT



Talsley

Product: Egyptian Limestone
Price: POA