

Pace-Yourself Patio



By Barbara Elmore, HCMG

We are a society consumed by how much time something takes, and I am as consumed as the next person. I realized this as I kept reading articles about how to build my own patio. My eyes were continually drawn to the paragraphs that said I could finish in one or two weekends.

Wow! Start on a Friday and enjoy the patio by Monday. It sounded too good to be true.

It was. But as I realized during the building process, the getting there was as good as the going — much like gardening. And after adding up the person-hours that my building partner (my sister) and I spent building the 10-by-20-foot patio, we noted that we could have completed the project in two days as it took about 40 hours. We just didn't want to kill ourselves doing it. So our patio took about five weeks from start to finish with two people working two or three hours at a time, several days a week. Some weeks we found no time to work at all.

I learned that although it is good to know how long a task should take so that you can make sure you are not leaving out or adding steps, time is not the most important aspect. Learning to do something, discovering what you are good and not-so-good at, and spending time with someone you enjoy all share equal importance.

Want to do your own? Here is what we did:

1. Determine where you want to build your patio and what size you want it to be. You will use this size when purchasing materials. Some people excavate soil to build. Since ours adjoins an existing back porch, we did not excavate but built on top of the soil.
2. If you are building over warm-season grass, do it in the winter or early spring, before your grass is growing. You will need weed cloth, edging material, rock, sand and gravel.
3. Buy weed cloth in a bulk roll so you can overlap the edges. Roll it out to desired size and cut to fit. Anchor with landscape pins. Try to leave at least 1 inch on the outside of the edging.
4. Install edging. We used a recycled material that resembles plastic and comes in a roll. We had to buy extra anchor pins for it; too few came with the package. Use anchor pins about every foot. You may think you can use the pins that come with the weed cloth. We found them to be too lightweight to hold edging in place.
5. Put sand on top of the weed cloth about 2 - 3 inches deep, depending on how tall you want your patio to be, and rake smooth. Spray sand with water, then tamp down. Note: Patio builders argue about whether to compact the sand before laying the rocks. We compacted ours somewhat to keep it from shifting. If you have enough muscle, you can use a roller to compact it. My husband built a tool for tamping — a pole with a large wooden rectangle on the bottom — that I could use, rather than a heavy roller.
6. The fun stuff! Begin putting in the rocks. You decide the shape and size. We alternated sizes and placed the rocks about 1/2 inch to an inch apart. Sometimes we left more space, sometimes less.
7. Level rocks as you go, using a carpenter's level. Determine whether you have low spaces and build up low spots with sand. Note: When built, patio and edging should be the same height. If not, people will trip.
8. Once your rocks are in place, tamp down again.
9. Haul in decomposed granite. You can also use this to level if you need to. Place it in the cracks between the rocks. Once you have swept it all in, spray with water and tamp again if necessary. Note: Your rocks should not move once the granite dries. Let sit overnight to let granite and rocks settle. Add more granite as necessary to make sure rocks, dirt and edging are the same height. Spray again with water. Granite dries very hard. Keep some on hand for repairs.
10. Wondering if you are physically able to do this? My sister and I proved that two women of average size and ability can lift heavy rocks if they work together and pace themselves.

