GARDEN PATHS

Inspiring Designs and Practical Projects

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A NEW PRODUCT FOR STABILIZING GRAVEL

In 1983, Jonathan Hubbs of Phoenix, Arizona, developed a nontoxic, organic soil binder that is just coming onto the national and international markets. Called "Stabilizer," this natural glue comes from a widely available desert plant that he dries and reduces to a powder. It is spread on the surface of gravels, decomposed granite, or small sandy aggregate materials at the rate of 10 pounds per 100 square feet, tilled into the top 2 to 3 inches and watered. Once dry, it binds particles ¼-inch or smaller together to the point at which erosion is stopped and people can walk or drive small machines over the surface, and not break it up. At the same time, it stays porous to water and air, and with a shovel you can dig through the stabilized surface to plant trees or shrubs. If at a later date the path needs to be taken up, you simply have to till it to break the binding action of the stabilizer. Because it is a new product, the jury is still out on its longevity, but it has been in use in Canada and Europe for at least three years and, even where the ground freezes, it remains intact. As Hubbs told me,"This is a very forgiving material. Landscape architects and homeowners can make use of more natural landscape materials like existing gravels and sands for paving paths rather than relying on less aesthetic and more costly materials like asphalt and concrete."

The soil is another consideration when siting new plants. In many cases, you will find woodland soil has been exhausted by ferocious competition for water and nutrients among existing trees and shrubs. In such cases, look for areas where the ground is not too rooty in relatively open spaces, in places near large boulders or rock outcroppings where roots have not yet penetrated, and in places where tree trunks have decomposed. Excavate the soil a foot deep or more and then replace it with a mixture of equal parts topsoil, compost and peat.

For relatively root-free areas where the soil is not wholly depleted but needs enrichment, I fork the soil and then amend it. In clay soil, use equal parts sand and topsoil; in sandy soil, use equal parts topsoil and compost.

You might want to plant on rather than in rooty woodland soil by spreading a 10-inch layer of a soil-compost-peat mixture on top of the woodland floor and planting directly in that, mulching heavily with leaf mold from the forest floor and then watering heavily. Tough woodland plants native to your area will then stand a good chance of getting established before the tree roots invade the low mound. Plants introduced along the woodland path should complement the beauty of the natural woodland, and your choices should be dictated by what native plants are available in your area.

The paths in this chapter run the gamut from the formal to informal, from the broad gravel paths of European manor houses to the simple trodden earth paths that might well have been created by sheep or cows. No other category of materials offers such a broad variety of possibilities as do loose materials. By using them in skillful ways, you can introduce any number of sounds, textures and colors into your paths and thus your whole garden.