

Saturday, August 12, 2006 - 12:00 AM

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EcoConsumer

Old bricks add a new layer of interest to your landscape

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Make a creative environmental statement this summer
— one brick at a time.

With a little imagination and a lot of manual labor, you can scavenge used bricks and turn them into a striking landscaping project. Here are a few ideas to build on:

Lay your plans

Even if you have limited building skills, with salvaged bricks you can make a handsome border or walkway, or even a patio, raised bed or wall.

As you plan your project, gain motivation from the fact that people have been using old bricks for new projects for thousands of years.

You'll also be *so* 21st century, as part of the thriving "green building" movement.

Keeping usable old building materials out of the landfill just makes sense, and saves money.

In fact, a pioneering law in Massachusetts that took effect in July prohibits landfilling of bricks and several other building materials, as they are eminently reusable.

Don't get too ambitious with your first project — finding, hauling and placing all those bricks can be exhausting.

For inspiration, walk around your neighborhood to see what others have done with old bricks. Project



STEVE RICE / MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE

Create an eco-friendly patio by reusing the pavers you already have or by salvaging used bricks from other projects.

ideas and construction tips also abound on the Internet.

Find yourself a pile

In the Seattle area and around the nation, old bricks are in demand. The best ones, such as 100-year-old street-paving bricks, command a pretty penny. But you can still find free used bricks relatively easily.

Keep an eye out for renovation projects. If you see a pile of bricks in a yard, ask if you can have some. People sometimes offer bricks for free on Craigslist (www.seattle.craigslist.org/zip; search for "bricks").

If you can't find free bricks, check local used-building-materials stores, such as the RE Store (206-297-9119) and Second Use Building Materials (206-763-6929). They sell old bricks for 25 to 35 cents apiece.

Other resources include classified ads online and in newspapers, and King County Solid Waste Division's Online Materials Exchange (www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/exchange).

For a path or patio, look for paver bricks originally used for streets, alleys or sidewalks. Other types such as old chimney bricks will also work but won't be as durable under heavy foot traffic.

Basic brick cleanup

Chimney bricks may have a coat of black soot. To clean it off, use a wire brush, or try a homemade soot cleaner. For recipes, search online for "clean soot off bricks." Or just put the blackened side of the brick down. Avoid oily bricks from oil-furnace chimneys.

Old, free bricks will often have mortar attached. Mortar on bricks more than 70 years old should not be too difficult to remove, since that mortar was made of sand and lime, according to brick expert and author Ed Heddy.

The cement mortar used since then is much harder and can be a real chore to take off. Use a brick hammer, available for under \$30 at many hardware stores or online.

More tricks with bricks

When installing a patio with old bricks, don't use mortar between them. Instead, sweep sand into the cracks. This will allow water to drain right through the patio and avoid runoff, which causes erosion.

If you have raised beds, lay a strip of old bricks around the outside, to make it easier to mow the lawn

around them.

Let your imagination run wild. Invent a quirky pattern of bricks for a path or patio. Place bricks upright or at an angle for a border. Incorporate other materials — such as rocks, chunks of concrete or ornamental mosses — into your project design.

Whatever you create, you may be surprised how many compliments you get, and how proud you are of it.

The monthly EcoConsumer column aims to help readers balance consuming and conserving. Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.watson@metrokc.gov.

Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at www.KCecoconsumer.com.

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