

Gravel runs through it

No longer confined to country house drives, gravel is the cheap and practical solution to the thorniest garden problem

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In almost every period drama there will be a scene where the carriage sweeps along a tree-lined drive and draws to a whinnying halt before a grand Palladian portico. The soundtrack to these scenes always involves the crunching of wheels through a sea of raked gravel. It is a material that has been used by gardeners for ages, but recently it has become more and more popular and no longer confined to the paths of grand houses. Down most streets you will see gravel drives and, more interestingly, gravel gardens.

These come in two varieties – the advanced and the basic. The basic version is a very effective way of using gravel for its cosmetic properties – a conventionally planted garden with a shingle mulch. However, to create an environment specifically for growing alpine or drought-loving plants, you need the advanced version.

With the advanced-level garden the idea is to re-create natural growing conditions – alpine grow on mountain sides where the soil is rocky and any rain pauses only for the briefest of chats before running off down the slope. The same is true of many drought-resistant plants – the sure way to kill them off is allow them to loll around in soggy conditions. For this sort of garden two things are essential: a sunny spot and free-draining soil into which much compost and gravel needs to be dug. The bed should then be planted up and a two-inch layer of gravel applied as a mulch. This is a perfect environment to rear treasured specimens and plants that might be slightly hysterical if left to their own devices.

The basic version is more concerned with the look and practical uses of gravel. It is a very versatile material and can help create many different styles of garden: beach gardens, scree borders or dry-river beds. It can also help in areas of no-man's-land. My own garden had an area that was so full of rubble and poor soil that it was no good for

NEED TO KNOW

- One tonne of gravel will cover a 30sq m area to a depth of 25mm.
- Dig in lots of manure before applying the layer of gravel – it is extremely messy to do this later. Established plants are best fed with a dressing of Fish, Blood & Bone or those chicken manure pellets that dogs like to eat.
- Dead leaves can easily be raked off – any displaced gravel can be combed back into place.
- Buy locally – its weight makes it expensive (both financially and environmentally) to transport far.
- Ensure that the gravel matches nearby buildings. Grey granite looks ghastly next to honeyed stone and mellow brickwork.
- Do not spread gravel thicker than 30mm – otherwise pushing

wheelbarrows is very hard work and feels a bit like Chesil Beach.

- A weed-suppressant membrane is most effective in places where you do not wish to encourage plants to seed. Ensure that it is laid in the sub-base (which for a footpath should be about 100mm deep) rather than just under the gravel. This is to prevent gravel slipping around like pigs on ice and the membrane becoming visible.
- Avoid white chippings – they are impossible to clean and make a garden look like a cemetery.
- Do not use shingle smaller than 10mm in diameter – it gets stuck in shoes and looks like a luxurious litter tray to all the local cats.
- Japanese-style gardens look best in Japan. Perfect swirls of gravel can seem out of place here.

turf or border: instead we gravelled the whole area and it has been colonised by self-seeding plants such as aquilegias and foxgloves.

Likewise, in some small gardens the conventional lawn may not be practical. Not many people feel confident enough to plant the whole area and to pave it all is, perhaps, a bit harsh, so the perfect solution is gravel. I have a delightful client who was thoroughly cheesed off by having to spend each weekend mowing an ungrateful lawn, and wanted more room to grow plants. We removed the whole lawn and laid a layer of fine shingle over the entire area. Into this we planted great swaths of colour creating ever-changing views among a network of informal paths – you walk wherever you want.

The gravel also acts as a mulch, discouraging weeds and preventing evaporation. However, there are snags. The most common question asked is whether to put down a weed-suppressing membrane. Being a rather anarchic gardener I tend to advise against; mainly because it prevents self-seeding plants from fulfilling their destinies and thereby deprives us of both free plants and unexpected plant combinations. Yes, there will be weeds but they will be easy to uproot.

Gravel will never replace lawns or terraces but it will always be invaluable in the garden – not least because it is relatively cheap and easy to lay. Most plants adore it, slugs and burglars are discouraged and, most importantly, it makes a great noise every time you decide to come home in a horse-drawn carriage. ■

For more gravel-loving plants, visit timesonline.co.uk/gardens



Artemisia 'Powis Castle' and *Geranium psilostemon* (above), and *Papaver somniferum* (above right), are suitable gravel plants



Main picture, clockwise from bottom: *Lavandula stoechas* subsp. *pedunculata*, *Stachys byzantina*, irises and purple sage

