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The 'pre-cast' technique used to create Maggy Howarth Studios' bespoke mosaics was developed so the designs would be able to withstand northern European winters. The team is planning to work with a university this year to develop ways of reducing its use of concrete in the installation process.

'How the feature relates to the design intention and palette will be combined, as with all choices within a scheme, including the mood and the spirit we intend to evoke. Local vernacular and materials can have as much bearing as the aesthetic intention. I love to work with craftspeople and artists as this always brings more layers of meaning and interest to a space.'

Maggy Howarth Studios creates bespoke pebble mosaics, often incorporating Burlington slate. Client Director Steve Byrne says that while there is a tendency for some designers to introduce the client to the design studio and then step back from the creative process, his team thrives off the positive creative tension that interaction generates. 'The same client story that underpins the garden design needs to influence the mosaic design, and garden designers are sometimes better at articulating that than the client themselves,' he explains.

Burlington Stone, which works with designers, landscape architects, artists and specialist contractors, often as part of a wider project, sometimes receives detailed technical drawings and specifications, but also works from sketches, mood boards or simply a concept and a desired feel.

'Both approaches can work well,' says UK Sales Director Ian Ramsay. →

SPECIFYING BESPOKE STONE FEATURES

How best to find the right artist or supplier, work effectively with them, and select and use sustainable materials and working practices to bring your design to life

From traditional dry stone walls to intricate mosaic tiling or imposing monoliths, bespoke stone features can serve as focal points in a garden or landscape and help to embed the design in the surrounding landscape.

'Finding the right supplier or artist is very much steered by the brief for such a feature and can be very nuanced,' says garden designer Rae Wilkinson MSGLD, who studied art and 3D design at the University of Brighton, where she developed a strong understanding of composition, form, structure, and materials.

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A stone feature in a private garden in the Lake District. Burlington Stone quarries and processes all of its stone in Cumbria and the company has seen an increase in interest from designers wanting to source indigenous materials with a clear connection to place. 'British heritage stone offers that sense of authenticity,' says Ian Ramsay, the company's UK Sales Director.

'What matters most is understanding how the space will be used, how the stone will interact with planting, light, and the wider landscape, and what the designer is trying to achieve overall.'

Materials and specification

Talking to craftspeople, suppliers and landscape teams early on in the process about materials, specification, and different construction techniques can open up additional design opportunities, and, ultimately, reduce costs.

'A wall can be built "dry", alleviating the need for foundations or use of cement,' explains Paul Cheetham, of Gecko Stonework, 'allowing moisture to pass through, providing planting opportunities within the crevasses and an amazing habitat for wildlife.'

'LOCAL GEOLOGY MATTERS ENORMOUSLY. NATURAL STONE HAS A STRONG RELATIONSHIP WITH PLACE.'

Paul often creates a mood board of stonework that the client finds appealing and builds sample panels to help the designer and the client visualise the finished effect. 'Based on the geology, many areas have a particular stone, method of construction, or, indeed, laying style,' he explains. 'Within a twenty-mile radius of my home we have flint (chalk flint, field flint, cobbles), ironstone, soft chalky limestones such

as "clunch" and bargate stone, to name a few. Even when the client has chosen a stone type, they will often be drawn to a particular laying style; some prefer dry laid stone, others mortared.'

Material selection is one of the most important decisions within a landscape project because it shapes how the scheme will feel, not only on completion but decades into the future. 'A big part of that is understanding the setting,' says Ian. 'In many projects, local vernacular and geology matter enormously. Natural stone has a strong relationship with place, and British stone often sits more comfortably within British landscapes because the colours, textures, and character feel familiar and grounded within the environment.'





← Far left: Paul Cheetham of Gecko Stonework created several bespoke pieces for Max Parker-Smith's Moments of Reflection garden at RHS Chelsea 2025, including a 'squeeze stile' created from a single piece of stone split using a technique that can be traced back to the ancient Egyptians. Left: 'A stone wall, built correctly, will outlast a wall made of brick or cladding many times over,' says Paul.

'We also spend time understanding the overall design intent. Some schemes call for a very architectural and contemporary feel with crisp detailing and darker palettes. Others suit softer textures and more weathered finishes. The way the stone will age is always part of that discussion because natural stone develops character over time rather than deteriorating.'

The client's expectations also matter. 'Some people want a highly refined finish with very little variation, while others actively want movement, marking, and a more natural appearance,' Ian explains. 'Maintenance expectations are part of that conversation too, particularly in relation to finish selection and the way different surfaces will weather. The aim is always to balance design ambition with materials that are appropriate, durable and achievable.'

Sustainability considerations

The Society of Garden + Landscape Designers' (SGLD) Sustainability Manifesto encourages designers to consider conserving, recycling or upcycling materials such as stone, concrete foundations and sub-bases, especially when found on site or locally, and to question the advantages and disadvantages of the extraction and quarrying of natural stone.

'I will always look for local materials if they fit with the brief and intentions,' says Rae. 'Preferably reclaimed materials, to be even more sustainable.'

Paul agrees. 'Trying to source a local stone will help to keep things more sustainable, as will using reclaimed stone. Stone is one of very few materials that can be used over and over again, and damaged dry stone walls can be rebuilt relatively easily. A few years ago, I rebuilt a collapsed ironstone wall. It was more than a hundred years old and had been pushed over by some unwisely planted rhododendrons. Every piece of stone was salvaged. The old mortar was crushed and mixed with fresh lime and a little more sand to make the bedding mortar. The lime concrete from the old foundations was remade into a lime-rich concrete for the new foundations and the wall will be good for many decades to come.'

That long lifespan is important when assessing the environmental impact of natural stone, but Ian says the starting point when selecting materials should always be provenance. 'Designers should know where materials come from, how they are quarried and processed, and whether they are genuinely suited to the intended application and climate.'

'STONE IS ONE OF VERY FEW MATERIALS THAT CAN BE USED OVER AND OVER AGAIN.'

'One of the biggest budget enemies is poor quality stone,' Paul concurs. 'It's always worth asking for advice from those who have worked with stone day in and day out for many years. It will save you time and money in the long run.'

Working practices are another important consideration. 'Careful water management, dust control, and safe working conditions have become increasingly important across the industry,' explains Ian.

'Keeping a clean working area and arranging the stone in sizes and within reach makes the process safer, less demanding on the body – and more productive,' adds Paul.

Designers should also consider the wider construction, not just the visible surface. 'The choice of sub-base, bedding materials, concrete use, drainage strategy,' says Ian, 'and integration with other materials such as steel or timber all influence both the environmental impact and the long-term performance of the scheme.'

'The most successful landscapes are usually the ones where sustainability, durability, and beauty have been considered together from the outset, rather than treated as separate conversations.'

'In my eyes, stone is timeless,' concludes Paul. 'We are often working with materials in excess of a hundred and forty million years old and we owe it to those materials to make the finished project as beautiful and as long lasting as possible.' ●

USEFUL RESOURCES

Burlington Stone uses natural stone and stone minerals found in the mountains and fells of the Lake District and south Cumbria to craft bespoke features, burlingtonstone.co.uk

elemental26, web-based tool with six interconnected pillars including Materials Management, to help designers create sustainable landscapes, elementaltool.org

Caradon Stone, supplier of Cornish granite and slate all sustainably quarried from Bodmin Moor, caradonstone.co.uk

Gecko Stonework, specialist in working with natural stone for and on behalf of garden designers and architects, geckostonework.co.uk

London Stone SGLD ABP, supplier of natural stone and clay paving and fabricates bespoke stone products in-house, londonstone.co.uk

Maggy Howarth Studios, pebble art mosaic specialist, maggyhowarth.co.uk

Rae Wilkinson MSGLD, garden designer, raewilkinson.com

Stone Federation of Great Britain's Ethical Stone Register, a resource created specifically for the natural stone industry, in response to the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and the issues of sourcing materials responsibly, ethicalstoneregister.co.uk