



# The Plant Doctor's LANDSCAPE TIPS

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## HARDSCAPES IN LANDSCAPE

### INTRODUCTION

(Photos 1 & 2)

People value their landscapes because they provide an environment that is uniquely their own to enhance their home and property. No cookie cutters need apply here. There are many components that comprise a landscape, including but not limited to trees, shrubs, annuals and perennials; these living entities may be referred to “softscapes” or “plantscapes”. But wait, there’s more. Today, hardscapes are big business that property owners often invest more money in than their softscapes. The possibilities for hardscapes, semi-hardscapes, and softscapes are endless. Photo 1 is an exhibit at a Spring Home and Garden Show where I delivered two programs on tree and landscape issues; lovely integration of plants, hardscape, a water feature, and lights drew a lot of attention from the public, who will likely be prone to contract the skills of the company that designed the exhibit. In fact, based on what I’ve seen, should I dare say, that some of the skill level and creativity that goes into these hardscapes by many in our industry rival the masters of paintings and sculpture of centuries gone by . . . such as Michealangelo’s ‘David’, a facsimile (Photo 2) serving as an outdoor hardscape in Florence, Italy, taken by the author several years ago? Well . . . maybe not but close. Follow along with some examples of hardscapes/semi-hardscapes the author has examined over the years.



### UNUSUAL SOFTSCAPES

(Photos 3A & 3B)

There is no denying that softscapes in landscapes provide an infinite number of possibilities, each with its own unique contribution to the beauty of property. Reduction pruning, almost as severe as “pollarded” trees, can produce unique appearing trees such as these Catalpas (Photo 3A), which can stimulate novel tree culture, especially for small spaces under powerlines. People often wonder what species of trees these are because they appear unusual for catalpa. Passersby may wonder in awe how these palm trees are able to grow in Michigan (Photo 3B, near Whitehall, MI). In reality, severe pruning of the lower branches of these spruces was performed to provide more light to a garden underneath. I thought that *Picea palmatum* might be a good species name for these unique specimens.



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#### TREE ART

(Photos 4A, 4B, & 4C)

When a tree dies, the traditional response is to cut the darn thing down and get rid of the eyesore. In recent years, however, those dead trees have been turned into works of art, which might be called semi-hardscapes. I am truly amazed at the level of skill and creativity by arborists-carvers who demonstrate amazing talent with chain saws, almost akin to the delicate touch of a brain surgeon. With some maintenance, these works of art can last for many decades. There is likely no better way to preserve the memory of that favorite tree. Photo 4A was carved from a large red oak killed by the Oak Wilt fungus at a cottage landscape on the shores of Houghton Lake, Michigan. Photo 4B was pruned from an American Elm killed by the Dutch Elm Disease fungus in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Photo 4C (and inset) was another carving near Traverse City, Michigan.

#### ROCK AND ROLL

(Photos 5A & 5B)

Rock, boulders, stone, concrete, etc. typically represent the true hardscapes of landscapes. Design challenges usually attempt to integrate hardscape with softscape as the Garden Show display in Photo 1 shows so eloquently. In Photo 5A, the "Boulder Mulch" may be highly effective at keeping mowers away from trees and protected landscape areas, but they may also cause soil/root compaction that could eventually lead to plant decline; in some instances, boulders are leaned against tree trunks and root flares, creating a really adverse condition for living plants. We must be aware of the vicinity of plants and their roots when we install footings for those elaborate hardscape structures (Photo 1). Another common example representing hardscapes is this stone wall integrated into a landscape in Battle Creek, Michigan (Photo 5B); this wall also serves as a "natural barrier" to pedestrians whose dogs may not be welcome in the adjacent landscape and private residence. Because of the nature of hardscapes, we must also be cognizant of unintended consequences of our endeavors on living softscapes.



Photo 4A



Photo 4B



Photo 4C



Photo 5A



Photo 5B

#### STRUCTURES

(Photos 6A & 6B)

I've always been in love with old barns. From my standpoint, nothing is "sexier" than a classic old Michigan hip-roof barn . . . in this case with a plantscape painted on its front (Photo 6A). While most of our clients do not have the space nor, perhaps, the desire for a big, old barn in their landscape, there are a plethora of structures that can add immense hardscape character to landscapes (Photo 6B). Many are highly ornate . . . and are becoming more diverse and attractive as builders create new designs and unique textures/colors in these structures as time goes by.

#### WATER FEATURES

(Photo 7)

There's something about water. Most of us love to be near water, whether in the vicinity of a lake, a river, or a pond. That's why property values increase dramatically near water. Flowing water provides a calming, mesmerizing and comforting environment to take away the stresses of our daily lives (Photo 1). Water features are as diverse as plants in landscapes. Forsyth Park in Savannah, Georgia features this old fountain that is a favorite backdrop for family and/or lovers' photos (Photo 7).



Photo 6A



Photo 6B



Photo 7



Photo 8A



Photo 8C



Photo 8B



Photo 8D

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**CAN HARDSCAPES BE TACKY?**  
**(Photos 8A, 8B, 8C, & 8D)**

People exhibit various predilections in their hardscape selections. As such, there are some occasions where hardscapes may border on bad tastes as this old clawfoot bathtub, which is serving as a planter, demonstrates near New Castle, Pennsylvania (Photo 8A). Some individuals may find this statue in this landscape unbecoming, but "Divine Intervention" is always welcome when a serious tree disease such as Oak Wilt has killed the trees in the background (Photo 8B). The crafts added to these tree trunks may appear slovenly to some individuals but also represent some interesting creativity (Photo 8C). In the author's opinion, old bicycles with optional planters, as Photo 8D taken by the author in Oxford England in 2011 demonstrates, are always welcome as attractive complements to hardscapes in landscapes. 🌿