



Behind the GARDEN WALL

BRING THE ANCIENT CRAFT OF DRY STONE
SETTING INTO YOUR OWN BACKYARD

Written by Robyn Rochm Cannon

Think of the most unique gardens you have visited. What makes them special?

My favorites share one important feature that provides privacy and an air of mystery and makes these spaces appear as though they've been there forever: containment behind a garden wall.

Historic European gardens have beautiful walls made of stone, skillfully laid by craftsmen who call themselves dry stone wallers. This ancient technique—literally thousands of years old—relies on principles of gravity and friction to tie the wall together. The absence of mortar to hold the stones in place is what sets dry stone setting apart from masonry, where mortar is always a part of the construction process.

Chuck Eblacker artfully designs and executes stone walls, magical stone features like circular “moon gates,” stone pizza ovens, and



fireplaces in residential garden settings in up-state New York. “Stone walling was essentially man’s first craft,” Eblacker comments.

“It has a very rich history in the colonial United States and was born out of the need for agriculture. Farmers cleared their fields to plant crops and, in the process, uncovered thousands of fieldstones, which they didn’t move off the property, but used to make walls to establish boundaries and contain their livestock. Amazingly, the majority of these walls are still standing today. A well-constructed wall should last at least a century.”

Eblacker admits that stone walling is sadly somewhat of a “dying art,” not taught in landscape architecture schools and often misinterpreted by landscapers, who build walls that may be cosmetically attractive but don’t have enough structural integrity to last even a generation. But he contends that anyone can learn to build walls that are artistic and structurally sound.

He’s a member of an elite group of dry stone craftsman called the Dry Stone Walling Association of Great Britain, which has set the international principles and standards for his trade for centuries. Members throughout the world share artistic and structural techniques and continue their tradition by teaching novice stone setters and homeowners how to approach their own projects.

“Stone walling is a skill that requires very little in the way of equipment,” he

acknowledges. “Choose a stone that’s as local as possible. Ideally, use stone found on the property—we believe that gives the wall a spiritual tie to the land. Beyond that, you need a hammer, some string, and stakes to set your lines, and you have enough supplies to build a wall.”

It would seem that building walls without mortar is not a good idea for those who live in areas prone to earthquakes, but Eblacker disagrees. “A properly constructed wall can rise to forty feet and survive an earthquake. It will have flexibility and actually ‘breathe,’ settling back into its original shape.”

Stone walls can take many shapes, from tall and straight to low and curvilinear. Landscape designer Julie Moir Messervy believes that they add whimsy and interest to a garden and frequently ties a wall into her designs. Annually, she and Eblacker bring expert stone setters together on her Saxton River, Vermont, estate to conduct weekend-long stone wall setting workshops and explore various techniques.

“Walls define a garden by creating corners, edges, and organizing it into zones: the ‘welcoming zone,’ the ‘living zone,’ and transitional spaces,” Moir Messervy says. “The ‘neighboring zone’ sets you apart from other homes. A beautiful stone wall creates a nestling hug of safety and refuge around a property. Once inside, your garden becomes a magical, private sanctuary.” ■

Building a Dry Stone Garden Wall: Tips from a Master Stone Setter

Construct the wall on a firm, angular, crushed-stone footing.

Place the largest and heaviest stone at the base of the wall, creating a strong foundation.

Imagine “weaving” the stone. Place each stone so it touches six others—two on its top, two on its bottom, and snugly against its neighbor on each side. The next row will cross the joints of the row below it and establish a pattern of one stone on two, two stones on one, and so forth.

Use your hammer to make the stones fit tighter and keep the rows flat as you proceed.

By using long, narrow stones and placing them lengthwise into the wall, you’ll create a bond of maximum strength.

As the wall climbs, step it back two inches for every foot of height. This technique, called “batter,” allows gravity to work and pull the structure tightly together.

Don’t pour gravel behind the wall; it will destabilize the construction. Instead, fill voids between stones with “heating stone” (small fragments of the wall stone) to increase friction and stability.

Cap your wall with attractive flat stones that aren’t easily dislodged.