

Decorative Options for Driveways

Many homeowners overlook the design impact that a driveway can have on their home. An unsightly driveway can impact curb appeal, but a decorative one can enhance the look of the property and home.

For homeowners looking to either lay a new driveway in their brand-new home or replace an old driveway to give the exterior of their house a new look, the following materials are among the many that can now be used for the purpose of driveways.

* **Asphalt:** Asphalt driveways are the most common, thanks in large part to their cost effectiveness and minimal maintenance requirements. Due to that popularity, contractors can easily install an asphalt driveway.

A mixture of tar, gravel and concrete, asphalt attracts heat, making it very hot in warmer months, something parents of young children who frequently play outdoors might want to think about. Another disadvantage to asphalt driveways is that they're oil-based and as a result flexible, making them vulnerable to cracking.

* **Concrete:** Concrete is another very popular choice for driveways, and one that allows for more creativity than asphalt. Whereas asphalt driveways are limited to a blue or black hue, concrete driveways can be customized to almost any color you prefer. In addition, concrete driveways can feature stenciled designs, essentially making your driveway similar to an artist's canvas, albeit one that will require frequent sealing.

Though concrete driveways are tough and weather-resistant, they can stain rather easily and have traditionally proven difficult to clean. Such problems, however, might be worth it for those who prefer a more individual driveway.

* **Gravel or pebble.** For those who enjoy driveways that remind them of historical times when horses pulled carriages up the driveways of estates, gravel or pebble is the choice for you. Among the more understated and elegant options, gravel or pebble driveways are also cost-effective and durable, in addition to requiring little maintenance.

One of the chief concerns when going with a gravel driveway is washout, where a heavy rainstorm could wash away all of a driveway's stones. This concern can be easily quelled, however, by



edging in the driveway with scoria rock, bluestone or a hard timber that will keep the gravel or pebbles from washing away. A more legitimate concern is the potential for driveways to turn muddy, a common problem for gravel driveways containing clay.

* **Cobblestone or bluestone.** Though these materials are eco-friendly, they're not wallet-friendly. Along with that, they can be a handful to maintain, as they're prone to weeds and often require resealing. Another common problem is loose stones, which need to be replaced.

While they can be problematic, they're among the more aesthetically appealing options, often looking exceptionally beautiful when set alongside a yard's natural landscape. Smaller driveways are good for these materials, as you'll spend less and you won't expend so much energy with maintenance.

* **Brick.** Brick driveways can be a sight for sore eyes. Those who have opted for brick driveways have traditionally found that their driveways have become a feature of their home. The downside, however, is cost, as brick driveways can be pricey to install, a large part of which is thanks to labor costs.

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Tips on Safely Buying a Used Car

Buying a car is a big deal. Not only is a car a large financial commitment, but it's also something you'll need to rely in a number of different ways. While a new car comes with built-in reliability, when buying a used car there's always a question as to how good an investment the vehicle will turn out to be.

Fortunately, the used car business has become a lot more buyer-friendly over the years. In addition to lemon laws protecting the buyer from ill-intentioned sellers, other safety nets like CARFAX vehicle history reports are now available. Other ways to lessen the risk when buying a used car include the following.

* **Do your homework:** These days, nearly everyone has a car, and most families have two cars. Many families with high school or college-aged children even have a third car. When looking to buy a used car, poll friends about the cars they drive and their opinions. Find someone who drives the vehicle you're considering and find out how the vehicle stacks up. Ask about maintenance, gas mileage, how many miles it has and how well it's still running. This should give an accurate portrayal of what you can expect from the car.

It helps to be specific as well. Ask your mechanic about the car you're considering buying, and specifically the cost of parts and maintenance that you can expect with the vehicle. Because it's a used car, you're probably going to need to replace some parts down the road, so buying a car with easily found parts will be far more prudent than one where parts are hard to find and expensive.

* **Take the vehicle to your mechanic:**

This is especially important if you're buying the car from a private citizen. Don't simply take the seller on his or her word when buying a used car. Insist on taking the vehicle to your mechanic (even if you're buying from a dealership) to have it inspected. If the seller, dealer or private, is not willing to let you do this, walk away from the vehicle. In the case of a dealership, don't simply assume the car is in perfect condition because they're a dealership. While lemon laws do exist, even dealerships sell cars "as is," and that puts the buyer in a precarious position.

* **Read what you sign:** If buying from a private citizen, be sure there are no liens against the vehicle and that the person from whom you're buying the car is the registered owner of the vehicle.

When buying from a dealership it pays to read the fine print as well. For example, simply because a used car is "Certified" doesn't mean it's free of any and all problems. Certified used cars will come with papers that include just what may or may not be wrong with the car, such as a history of engine troubles or an accident in the past. These things don't exclude a used car from a "Certified" designation, so be sure to read the certification papers carefully so you know exactly what you're getting into.

Also, before signing any contracts, make sure the things you were told by the seller are in writing. This includes warranty details. Some vehicle manufacturers have different policies when it comes to transferring a warranty, so make sure what you discussed with the dealer is in writing.

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