

Simple Steps to the Perfect Patio

The sun is setting on a summer's evening. You pour yourself a nice cuppa at the end of a busy day and head into the garden. You sit under the big green umbrella and place your drink on the wooden table top and settle into the comfortable canvas chair to listen to the birds singing ... what an ideal way to end a day, sitting on your patio.

Before you get to that stage there is a lot of hard work needed! First of all, you need to decide on where you will have your patio. The choice will often be dictated by the layout of your house and the main way that you intend to use it. For example, for entertaining, you would want the patio to be easily accessed from the house, perhaps with the French doors opening onto it. If you just intend it as a pleasant area in which to relax, you would site it in a peaceful corner of the garden. So make up your mind on this first.

Next is the design. You need to decide on the type of surface, maybe you will use real stone such as slate, maybe block paving or reclaimed York stone is your thing. A cheaper alternative is to use concrete slabs, it is amazing what the producers can do with these now, they can be made to mimic real stone at a fraction of the price. The shade needs to blend in with your garden. Darker colours will get hotter during the day and stay warmer for longer after the sun has slipped below the horizon. How will you set the slabs, in a random or regular pattern? If you are not sure which would look better, cut out scale models of the different slab sizes and set them out on the table in different ways until you are satisfied.

So the decision making is done, the manual labour begins. Mark out the patio area with pegs and string. Dig it out by at least 15cm below the intended level so that there is room for both the hardcore foundation and the mortar support layer under the slabs. If your patio is to be against the house, make sure that the slabs, when finally laid, are at least 15cm below the damp proof course and that you build in a slope that will take rainwater away from the house to a soakaway area. Hammer a series of wooden pegs into the ground, the tops of which should be at the intended height of the finished patio – these are essential for levelling. They should be level with existing paving or inspection covers, drains etc. A long spirit level is extremely useful. To make the soakaway, dig a trench about 30cm deep along the lowest edge and fill it with gravel (or part fill with gravel and then soil on top if you want to disguise it).

Next, pour in the hardcore and compact it thoroughly. This can be broken up rubble from your own garden or you can buy it from DIY stores. Either way, to avoid potential problems with the patio becoming uneven over time, hire a mechanical compactor plate (sometimes called a whacker plate). You can do things on the cheap and make yourself a manual 'thumper' but the results

are never as good as when you use the correct tool. Poorly compacted hardcore will lead to problems – the patio will become uneven as it settles.

The slabs are then laid on a mortar base (5 parts sand to 1 part cement). If you are making a large patio then it would probably be worthwhile hiring a cement mixer. Start laying the slabs from a straight edge, easily marked out using a couple of small wooden stakes hammered into the ground with garden string stretched between the two. For each slab, place 5 blobs of the mortar mix onto the hardcore, one for the centre of the slab and one for each corner. Use a rubber mallet to gently tap the slab downwards, checking the level against the wooden pegs already placed for that purpose. Leave a 1 cm gap between the slabs for pointing unless you are using slabs designed to fit together without spaces.

Clean off any excess mortar to avoid staining and leave it to cure for a few days. Point up the joints on the second day but use a long wide plank to spread your weight otherwise the slabs could be disturbed.

Simple eh? It sounds it but unless you take your time and do it carefully, you are likely to end up with something that is less than perfect. It is much easier - and frankly not a lot more expensive when you take into account hiring or buying the necessary tools - to employ a professional to do the job for you. They lay so many patios that it becomes second nature. And you are more likely to end up with a more durable end product that does not become uneven during its first winter!

Hire a [Landscape Gardener](#) to lay a patio that will be the envy of your neighbours. Contact Luke Harrison now to lay your paving in south Derbyshire for [professional patio paving services](#)