

# Getting Into Hardscaping

Expand your deck business by partnering with a patio contractor

by Bobby Parks



Even though I'm in business to build decks, I recognize that they aren't always the right solution for an outdoor space. Sometimes the door threshold is too close to grade for a deck to be properly elevated, for example, in which case a hardscape option might be preferable (**Figure 1**). Sometimes clients want a patio underneath an upper-level deck, or are interested in extending or upgrading an existing patio. Fire pits or fireplaces and retaining walls are always nice upgrades.

We don't like to simply hand off profitable work like this, but we're too busy building decks to be full-service landscapers ourselves. Instead, we take on a role that's similar to that of a remodeler (we're licensed as residential/light-commercial contractors in Georgia). Managing these types of projects as a general contractor allows us to provide better service and increase our sales with a minimal investment in additional equipment or skills. The key is having a knowledgeable person on staff who can estimate hardscaping projects and coordinate with one of the small group of qualified contractors and subcontractors that we work with.

## Find Good Partners

Patios and limited hardscape offerings actually aren't that difficult to estimate. We have a basic knowledge of per-square-foot pricing ranges and know how to make allowances for sloping grades or for a pump truck when access is an issue.

I discuss hardscape options while I'm meeting with clients about their deck work, and gather pertinent site information at the same time I'm gathering it for the deck or porch. When a job is straightforward, I can price it and include it in the contract for the deck. We then hire a

subcontractor to perform the work, leaving my carpenters free to focus on the deck. If there's anything I'm not sure about, I take photos and show them to the hardscape contractor before I give the clients a price.

In other cases, I provide a ballpark estimate and ask the hardscape contractor to follow up with the clients and discuss finish options and final pricing. He works directly with—and bills—the clients, and he provides the warranty. This simple approach minimizes the time I spend quoting a job and still allows clients to quickly understand the overall project cost, which helps them to make decisions and move the project forward.

Unless I have a signed contract for the deck or porch, however, I don't connect the two parties or send my subs or associates out to give a prospect an estimate, nor do I even disclose names. I've worked hard to develop relationships with reliable subs, and if customers want to benefit from my quality subs, they'll need to contract with me.

### Patio Options

Often, a deck project will include concrete flatwork, which is a functional and economical—but not very appealing—hardscaping surface. Among the options we discuss with our clients are ways to enhance the concrete, either with a coating, particularly if we're adding an extension to an existing patio, or with a stamped surface if a new patio or porch floor is being poured. Both make great floors for porches, patios, and areas under weatherproof upper decks.

A concrete slab can be extended, but the new pour must be pegged to the old slab to prevent differential settling (**Figure 2**). When there's any type of grade, we need to factor in the cost of turning down the outer edge into the grade at least a few inches to prevent erosion.



**Figure 1.** On a level site where the interior floor is close to grade, a patio is often a better and less-costly option than a low-elevation deck.



When overhead structures are involved, footings can be incorporated into the concrete pour or they can be dug and poured beforehand. We often build porches and watertight decks and load our columns prior to a patio pour. The key is to make sure the top of the footing is lower than the bottom edge of the patio so that it doesn't interfere with the concrete thickness.

**Figure 2.** Extending an existing concrete patio is a straightforward project, but the rebar reinforcement in the new slab must be pegged to the old to prevent differential settling.





**Figure 3.** When a concrete slab has been extended, a thin concrete coating can be used to visually tie the old and new slabs together. The coating shown here has been stamped and colored to look like natural stone.



**Concrete coatings.** Concrete coatings can bring new life to an old concrete pad, as long as it's structurally sound (**Figure 3**). We often use coatings to blend old patios and new extensions together, by providing them with a consistent finish. Coatings are also great for covering patches in concrete, such as when we need to cut through a slab to install column footings. In our market, coating prices start as low \$4 per square foot.

The overlay mix consists of sand, cement, and polymer resins that provide the finished surface with flexibility and impressive strength. Stampable overlays are typically applied with a gauge rake and add up to about an inch of thickness to the slab. The coating can be colored, and flexible stamping tools can be used to duplicate the look and texture of virtually any material, including stone, tile, and even wood.

**Stamped concrete.** A newly-poured concrete slab can also be colored and stamped. A stamped concrete patio costs about twice as much as standard concrete in my area, or about \$9 to \$12 per square foot, which includes the site work and forming.

Like any concrete slab, a stamped concrete installation will require expansion joints (relief cuts to control cracking). When discussing this option with clients, I point out that small round patterns will be visually impacted by the straight expansion joints, and should probably be avoided (**Figure 4**). These cuts aren't quite as problematic with large circular patterns, and are least noticeable with large square or rectangular patterns. Depending on the pattern, the expansion joints can even be an asset, making the surface look like it's composed of large slabs of slate or granite.

**Figure 4.** The flat, smooth finish of stamped concrete makes it well-suited for a screened-porch floor. Note the expansion joints, which are more noticeable in the faux flagstone floor (above, left) than in the larger random pattern at left, where the relief joints make the patio appear to be composed of large slabs of slate.



**Figure 5.** A walkway built with natural stone or concrete pavers can be used to complement most styles of porches and decks.



**Figure 6.** The author prefers to set flagstone patios and walkways in mortar over a concrete slab rather than over a sand or crushed-stone base. This method requires more attention to drainage details, because water can't seep through the joints between the stones.



**Pavers.** Pavers made of stone or concrete are another option we offer. They're installed over a properly prepared sand or crusher base, and in my area typically cost about the same as a stamped concrete patio (**Figure 5**). We don't install a lot of paver patios, partly because we haven't yet found a great paver guy to work with.

**Flagstone.** When cost isn't a concern, most of our clients prefer flagstone patios (**Figure 6**). Natural flagstone makes a great patio and open-air porch surface that mixes well with retaining walls, fire pits, and other hardscape options. I steer clients away from using it in screened porches, though, because its uneven surface will create gaps between the floor and the wall plates. In our market, a flagstone patio costs at least \$15 per square foot—three times as much as poured concrete. This price assumes that the flagstones are set in mortar over a concrete slab, rather than dry-laid over a crushed-stone base.

When the design permits, we like to provide paver or flagstone porch floors with a defined edge (**Figure 7**). Raising these hard surfaces about 6 inches above grade rather than leaving them flush with the sod provides better drainage and makes mowing and trimming easier.

### A Growth Area

Hardscaping has become an important aspect of our business, and one that we could develop even more in the future. With our current business volume and capabilities, we haven't felt the need to add more offerings, and—to the extent that I can—I like to keep things simple. But let's face it: Being a deck builder isn't as simple as it used to be. Now we have to deal with increasing building regulations and the complexities that come with them, which has forced us to become better business people. To better compete in this environment, deck builders today should consider thinking like a remodeler, coordinating and offering services beyond just deck building. By delivering patios and limited hardscapes, my company has expanded naturally with minimal changes to our in-house procedures. ♦

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**Figure 7.** When a porch or overhead structure is involved, the author elevates the patio's outer edge 4 to 8 inches above the ground, with enough slope to shed water. This minimizes ground splatter from rain, keeps lawn-mower wheels from rolling across the patio and tracking it up, and provides a defined edge for a weed whacker.