



Stone-age revival

We focus so much on plants outside, but there is also beauty in nostalgic structures

>> **Words and photography**
Tony Fawcett

Whether used to build country cottages, churches or simply retaining walls, stone has long been a favourite building material.

And even in this age where fake stone is available, lovers of the natural beauty of "the real stuff" insist its rough, gritty appearance can't be beaten, especially in gardens.

"It's the way to gain true garden atmosphere," says Melbourne garden designer Philip Stray, whose signature stonework features are much in demand with gardeners and homemakers.

"Use genuine earthy materials, such as stone and timber with water, in a good design and it adds up to a pretty spunky garden," he says.

"What's important about stone is that it's such a permanent thing, and it conjures a lot of nostalgia of times past in people's minds."

Philip, who has been building stone structures since he was a schoolboy, claims stone is becoming more popular, particularly now that stoneworkers are learning to use it in more contemporary ways.



Pillar of power

A random-bond pillar is effective near a decorative pebbled path (left)

The right steps

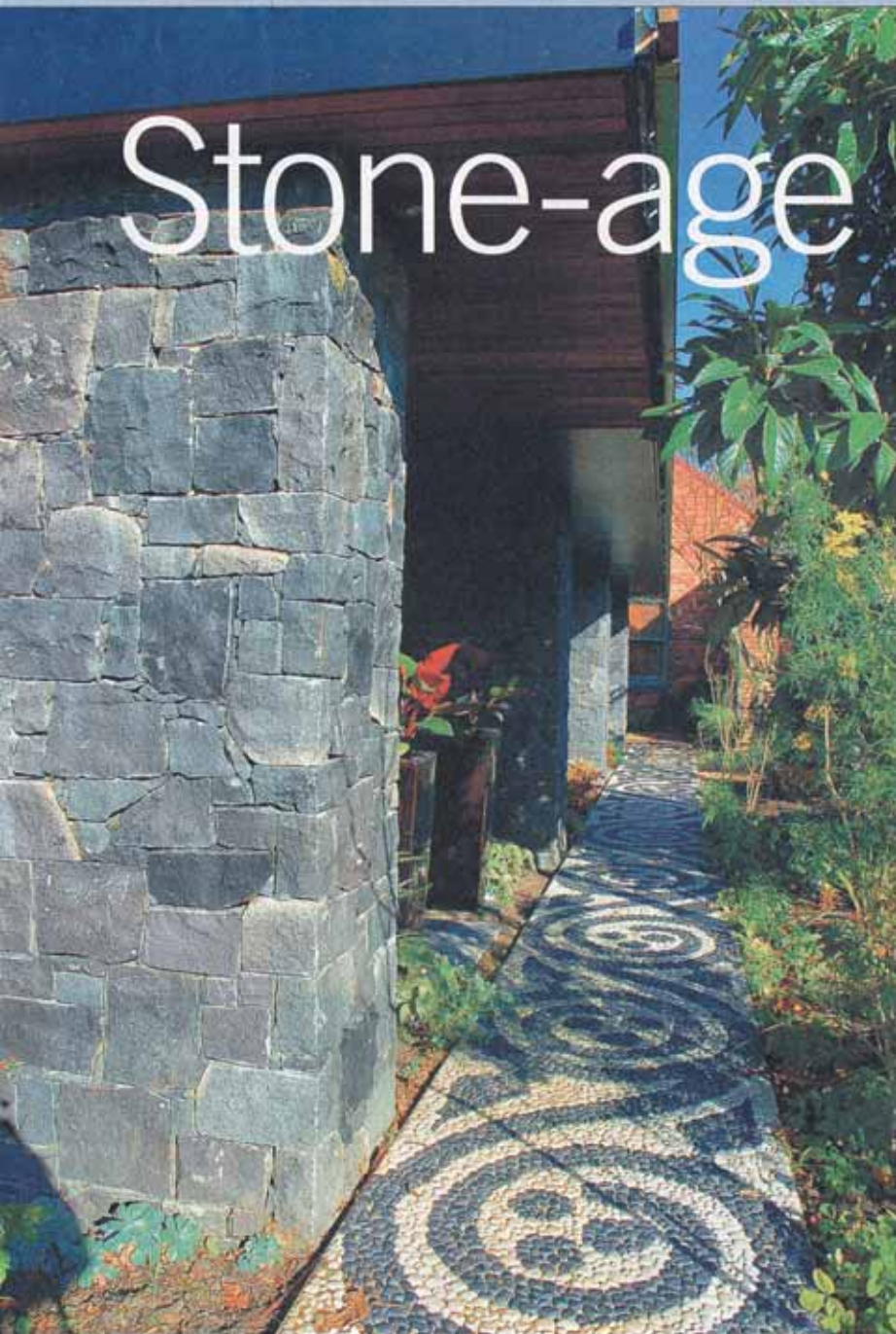
Stonework can give practical features an attractive finish (above)

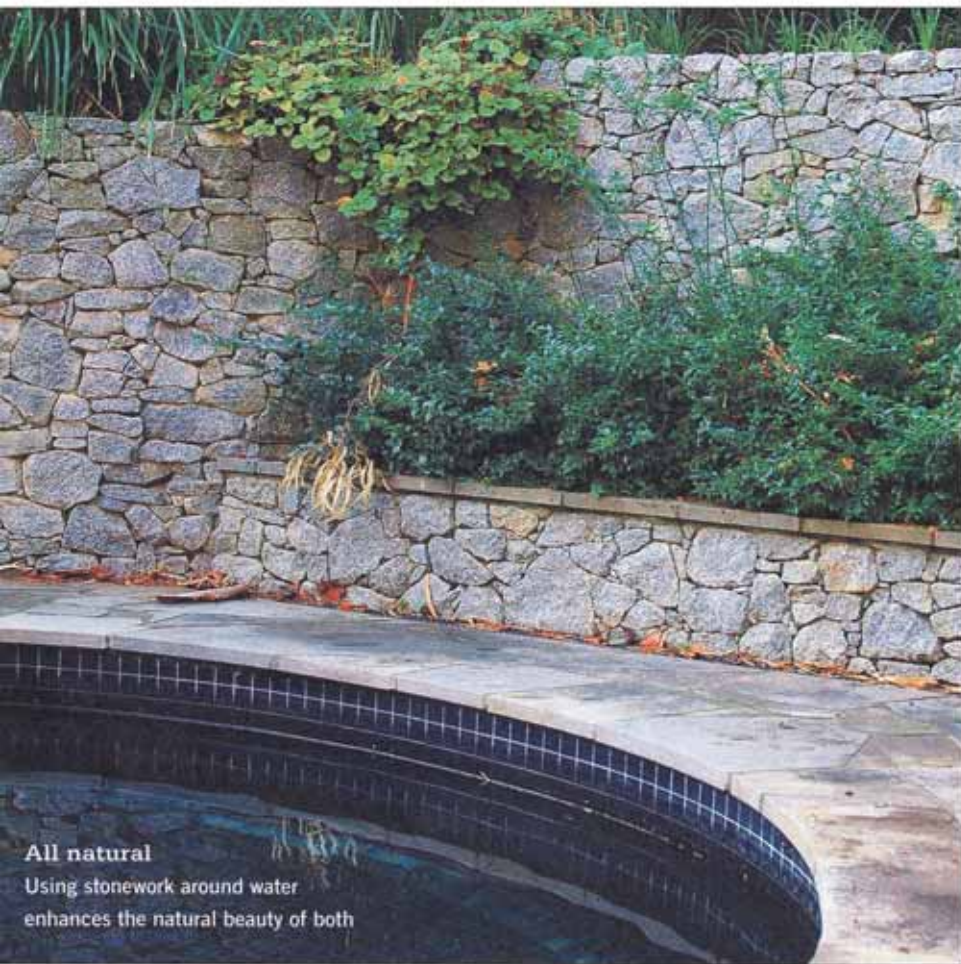
But it must be done well, he warns.

"Stonework done well is fantastic, but done poorly it can be awful," he says.

Some of Philip's best recent work features granite used so narrow gaps, or shadow lines, appear between the stone. Granite can appear quite cold, but a shadow line gives it life and interest.

"It's like a jigsaw puzzle, but in this >>





All natural

Using stonework around water enhances the natural beauty of both

>> case it's the joins of the jigsaw that are important," Philip says. "This is what's attractive, the way it picks up light.

"It could also be compared to a picket fence, where it's the negative parts of the fence, what's not there, that are important."

Philip calls his style "cottage", or "random bond". It is, he says, a dry-stone version of the stonework in Melbourne's St Patrick's Cathedral. Typically, it features one big piece of stone with three smaller pieces locking up to it. But Philip's work includes smaller chips of stone to add further interest.

> Building your own

Philip says once you gain the knack, stoneworking is not that difficult. But he admits "true stonework done well takes a lot of time".

"I think if you are a home handyperson and you need to deck out or build a small retaining wall, there could be nothing more rewarding than doing some stunning stonework," he says.

"Once you get into a rhythm you are right. It's like brickwork. You put your mind in neutral, get the stereo going and you're away.

"But in some ways I think you need to have a sense of craziness to build stone

walls. You either need to have a Zen-like approach and meditate over each stone, or have a sense of crazy."

Some may assume those with Irish or Scottish backgrounds have a greater affinity with stone, but Philip insists a sense of the chilled-out Aussie larrikin can also be an advantage.

It could be, he ponders, due to the fact the ancestors of many Australians "were chipping away at stone as convicts in chains".

"You reach a stage when working with stone where your mind is in neutral, and you lay one stone after the other," he says.

"Stonework reflects the worker's mood. Stone I lay on Monday after a heavy weekend can look decidedly different to that produced on, say, a Wednesday.

"When I'm more relaxed my bluestone work looks more relaxed."

Philip says stone, particularly cast-off pieces smaller than about 200mm, can be bought relatively cheaply from local quarries.

Much of his inspiration comes from farmyard stonework he has seen in Cornwall and Devon, in England, and the dry-stone farm fences of the Stony Rises in the Western District of Victoria.



> How it's done

Much of Philip's work involves an outer layer of stone around an inner fill often comprising broken bricks and pieces of concrete.

Mortar is worked in behind, so it pins the outer rock in place.

With bluestone block pillars, the inner part is filled with concrete.

True stone walls can be self-supporting structures on the ground without a foundation, but Philip generally pours a concrete slab first.

For greater strength, the wall itself becomes narrower as it gets higher. With a 600mm-high wall, for instance, the base may be 300-400mm wide, and a narrow,

pyramid-style 250-300mm wide at the top.

Philip and his team of workers begin with the bottom layer of stone and generally work in 300mm increments, finishing one section before moving to the next.

It is like a 1000-piece jigsaw, he says, with random-sized rocks being used, and little concern if large gaps remain. The gaps are later filled with smaller chips of stone.

He says this variance in size gives the work a "gorgeous rhythm". And if the odd crack appears later, it adds to the character of the work.

Retaining walls need holes at the bottom to prevent built-up water pushing them over. ■

Little voice

Even pebbles have a place in garden stonework (above left)

Out of the shadows

Thin shadow lines add interest to a stone pillar (above centre)

Circles of life

Stones work well in subtle designs based on classic shapes (above right)

Days gone by

Garden designer Philip Stray says stone conjures nostalgic images in people's minds (right)