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Rock steady

The demand for pavers and retaining wall blocks goes up as people opt for more time at home

Story by Cam Sivesind

Ron Putz enjoys nothing more than putting people between a rock and a hard place. It's not that he's a mean guy; it's his job as Oregon hardscape manager for Mutual Materials Co., the Pacific Northwest's largest manufacturer and distributor of brick and concrete products for masonry and hardscape projects.

The 102-year-old family-owned company is based in Bellevue, Wash. Putz, a 16-year employee, manages the southern regional office out of Durham, Ore., just south of Portland. Mutual Materials entered the hardscaping business in 1993 after nearly a century as a brick manufacturer for the building trade.

So what is hardscaping? Putz defines it as "the solid or hard products used in the landscaping." The best way to think of it is picturing the dirt, bark and plant material as the softscape, or the muscle and skin. The hardscape is a project's structure or the skeleton, be it concrete pavers, rock boulders or retaining walls made of a cement-based material.

"It's a big growth industry," Putz said. "People are looking for much more than the standard stepping stones. Variety is the spice of life in this industry. We have the old standards, but we have new things, too."

It was in 1989 that Mutual Materials began offering pavers. "Pavers are segmental units made generally of concrete, natural stone or clay materials for use on a horizontal service or application such as driveways, walkways, patios, roads and crosswalks," Putz said. "Part of our marketing has been to promote the 'outdoor environment.' People want more of the 'home sweet home.' They want to sit on their patio with at least a little privacy. They want a more pleasing environment."

While pavers are for horizontal applications, segmental retaining walls — know as SRWs in the trade — are concrete interlocking units that are manufactured for vertical applications only. "They are generally not used for freestanding walls," Putz said. "The SRWs allow for free water flow, which adds tremendous weight." Such blocks are used to hold up an earthen wall, for example.

Landscape contractors say people have always enjoyed spending times in their yards or on their back patios. Since the tragedy of Sept. 11, 2001, the trend has increased. "People are spending more time in their yards," said Barclay Bullock, senior design associate with Drake's 7 Dees Landscaping in Portland, Ore. Drake's is one of several contractors Mutual Materials recommends to commercial and residential customers.

Mutual Materials has only ICPI-certified contractors on its preferred list. The Interlocking Concrete Pavement Institute trains contractors in the proper use and installation of pavers, offering certification classes. Mutual Materials also offers training,

often at the site of landscape contractor firms, so their customers not only know how to install their products but also understand how and why the products work.

The advent of pavers has simply made the job of installing a high-quality backyard that much easier for do-it-yourselfers and contractors.

“Up until just recently, it was the only way to get the variety people are looking for,” Bullock said. “You can get the feel of cobblestone, a simple stone look or polished pavers. They handle freezing and thawing and don’t crack like a large, poured concrete area. If a tree root creeps in, it’s easy to take up the pavers, fix the problem and replace the work. You get a lot more flexibility.”

Putz said he’s noticed contractors getting requests for a lot more driveways made with pavers. “People are getting away from concrete and asphalt,” he said.

The versatility of pavers extends their popularity beyond residential use. Commercial and public-sector projects are using them much more, Putz said. “It is a lot easier to take out, move and replace pavers, get to the infrastructure, make a fix and put it back,” he said. “It looks as good as it did before. There’s no patchwork like there is in concrete or pavement and asphalt.”

All of Mutual Materials’ products are made of concrete and all have some recycled material mixed in. Oftentimes, if a job site requires tearing out an old concrete slab, the material that is removed will be recycled and become part of a new paver in the future.

The latest in concrete pavers is the hydra- and hydro-pressed slabs, or hydraulically pressed concrete. This process allows manufacturers to create larger pavers as big as 24 by 24 inches square. The slabs weigh about 100 pounds apiece. Mutual Materials recently opened a new production plant in Abbotsford, British Columbia to produce such slabs.

“You can get marble and granite chips added, various colors and a soft- or hard-blasted finish,” Putz said. “You can get slate-finished pavers. We also offer a new circle pattern that comes in a complete kit for the do-it-yourselfers. Enough pavers come on a pallet to complete a 7-foot-diameter circle. We include the edging material, the sand and the stakes.”

Another new product is a Roman ashler stack stone, a tumbled retaining wall with different size units that can be set vertically or horizontally. They are smaller and easier to handle, Putz said.

Drake’s 7 Dees also has a retail garden center on its landscape site and sells Mutual Material and Western Interlock paver products to consumers. The retail store is going to spruce up the existing gravel pathways throughout its garden center by adding pavers.

“It’s a way to dress up our pathways without pouring concrete,” Bullock said. “And it’s a great way to advertise our product.”

Pavers also offer the *only* solution for some backyard projects, Bullock said. “A lot of times, people have small projects in small spaces and it’s hard to get a concrete truck into small yards,” he said. “Pavers are easier to handle and you can carry them up and down stairs if you need to.”

Bullock sees the use of more hydra-pressed slabs as a trend, because it is another option and provides a little more elegant look. He said he sees future home and commercial projects mixing colors and sizes to create designs and patterns.

Mutual Materials and other paver and SRW manufacturers are hoping to interest more independent garden centers in selling their products. “We’d like to grow that sector,” Putz said. “They could sell our unique stuff, the stuff box stores don’t sell. Contractors use a lot of our product variety.”