



Plectranthus Neochilus below, Periwinkle creeper on the top wall, both lined with lavender.

Bringing the green to the wall

The most critical aspects, as every good contractor will tell you, of any segmental retaining wall (SRW) will always remain detailed planning and competent workmanship. A solid wall is a lasting wall...and a completed one. Yet it is easy to forget that one similarly important task yet remains: the final landscaping that will transform a bland mass of concrete into a display of colour, scent and texture.

To plant or not to plant?

Some might say: "but the wall is doing what it

is meant to do, why bother with making it look good?" The answer is simple: Our world is increasingly becoming built up with concrete, maybe inevitably so, and if we do not pay attention to how this impacts visually on our environment and on human life, then we are indeed in trouble.

Ned Hettinger, professor of philosophy Charleston College, US, argues that the aesthetic consideration of our living or built environments are just as important as saving the rain forests:

"the word 'environment' should not be solely reserved for untouched nature. 'Man-made' or 'man-changed' environments fall into the same category, simply for the reason that they constitute, both in the present and the future, a large part of human existence. Human-created environments, such as sewage pipes, impervious concrete-lined canals, trash heaps, billboards, tacky neon strip-developments, smokestacks and suburban sprawl, all symbols of



Plectranthus Neochilus on a steep wall.

environmental degradation – should to be considered as paradigms of aesthetic non-value."

Basic steps to planting your wall

Landscaping a retaining wall might seem a daunting task but with the help from a good landscaping company you can transform your wall into an ecosystem that not only looks good but most importantly, provides a habitat for insect and animal life displaced by extensive building.

Liesl Wasmuth, in-house designer of Real Landscapes, a national landscaping company, recommends the Terraforce Retaining Wall System for landscaping purposes: "The first step to an attractively landscaped wall is the type of product used to create it. Terraforce



A variety of flowering ground covers.



For a steep rock face wall with limited space, trailing plants are suitable.

blocks are an inexpensive way to create retaining walls, planters, steps or even a raised edging. They're versatile and have the potential of transforming an area into something very special. The other nice thing about building a Terraforce block wall is that it's easy to fill with a good quality soil."

Next, says Wasmuth, you have to decide what type of plant/plants you might want to use. "This will be determined by the effect that you would like to create, the climatic conditions, the position, the colour scheme etc. Exposure to sunlight will determine whether you plant a shade-loving plant or one suitable for full sunlight."

"Also, the height and size of the wall should be considered when choosing a plant, as the size of the pockets is often determined by this - steep walls often have exceedingly small planting pockets as blocks are stacked closely together. If your wall is very steep, block are sometimes stacked very tightly and get filled with concrete or gravel, which makes it impossible to plant. In this case, if the wall is not that high, you can create a planter at the top in which trailing plants may be planted to trail down and cover the wall. If the wall is very high and the area is fairly big, it should be designed to include planting areas, like terraces or large pockets in which to plant."

Wasmuth also recommends either an analysis of the soil on site to see if it will be suitable for your chosen plant species, or importing good quality topsoil and some compost. "It would also be a good idea to add a good organic fertilizer into the mix, or drop a few pellets into the hole as you plant. Finally, fill the pockets with the desired mixture and start planting cuttings, seedlings or plants. Remember to water as you go along. Start at the top and work your way down."

Choosing your cover

When it comes to planting a retaining wall there



are as many ways to go about it as there are planting a normal garden, you just have to have some knowledge of what works and what not. Some people request their retaining wall be entirely covered with plants and other aim for a more structured look. While there are unlimited options for landscaping your wall, Wasmuth describes the most common ones:



A round face wall planted with a variety of waterwise vegetation.

Plants for quick and complete cover over the entire wall area:

Ivy (*Hedera algeriensis*) is very vigorous and will cover a wall in no time. It is suitable for sun and shade. Just keep an eye on this plant, as it will take over the whole garden if not controlled. Trim unruly arms back regularly. Convolvulus sabatius (morning glory) covers quickly in the right conditions, likes good loamy soil, lots of water and temperate conditions. For shady areas, Lamium species or Plectranthus Madagascar is a good option.

Plants for a water-wise wall that needs very little watering

Aptenia cordifolia (indigenous) is a tough, trailing succulent type ground cover that will grow in any soil and is perfect for coastal conditions. It has a bright cerise red flower in spring and

summer. Disphyma is also a succulent type creeper, covers quickly and efficiently without plenty of water. Another two hardy plants include Othonna capensis, an indigenous succulent type plant with small grey tubular leaves and small yellow flowers and Carpobrotus edulis (sour fig), an extremely hardy succulent.

All plants need some water when being planted and for some time after to establish properly. Once they have established, you can let them survive on their own.

And some plants for those that like it local

The plants mentioned above are all indigenous and also suitable, but a few more include:

Arctotis (African daisy) forms a dense grey mat with colourful daisy-like flowers. Also quite

Dwarf bougainvillea and hardy ground cover.



Plectranthus Neochilus in full bloom.



hardy, but needs to be cut back from time to time. Carissia macrocarpa is great for covering low stone walls. Works well for coastal conditions. Osteospermum ecklonis (creeping marguerite) is popular for flower power, like the Arctotis, and Plectranthus neochillus is a groundcover that is very easy to grow and useful for those difficult parts of the garden that are both dry and shady where root competition is a problem. It has fleshy green-grey foliage and a magnificent blue flower that flowers for just about all year round.

Creating features in you wall

To highlight certain areas and to create features in your wall you could create some planters within the wall, and add some feature plants/objects like Cycads or large clay pots.



Indigenous bulbs (*Agapanthus Africanus*) and ground cover (*Restio* family) with a backdrop of *Convolvulos Mauritanicus*.

You could also create various levels, with steps and little seating areas, to make things more interesting. If you have a solid wall, try inter-planting a few species with the same watering requirements, to produce a colourful show throughout the year.

Can I plant trees along or on my wall?

Roots from existing trees should be trimmed if they are in the way and root barriers may be installed to avoid damage. When planting trees on top of or in level areas within a wall, use ones with less aggressive root systems like Palms, *Acacia xantophloea*, *Brachylaena* or *Rhus pendulina*

Keeping it green

Of course any landscaped retaining wall needs

to be maintained. Wasmuth emphasizes that no watering is simply not an option, unless the wall is specifically planted for that purpose: "An irrigation system is ideal in any situation. Even if the chosen plants don't require a lot of water they will benefit from regular watering and will look better than those without irrigation. If you are not using water-wise species, an irrigation system is essential unless you have someone available to hand water plants on a regular basis."

Wasmuth concludes: "Why settle for an ordinary wall when, with a little effort and thought, you can create something really special."

To download a booklet on indigenous plants suitable for retaining walls, go to www.terraforce.com/downloads.html



Helichrysum Petiolare add some softness to this wall.



Crassula Coccinea has brilliant light green leaves and is drought tolerant.



Convolvulus/Lavender/Olive trees.