

You Can Build A Retaining Wall



For both a functional use and a decorative touch.

By Ron Specht

A block retaining wall can add beauty and function to any landscape. It may look complicated but it is a simple project that requires only basic skills. Unless you are constructing the Great Wall of China, these projects can be child's play. The blocks are just heavier and more expensive than the ones you played with as a kid. With the newer pre-cast, lipped concrete blocks, you can construct an elegant wall that is a snap to build. It's as easy as placing one block on top of another. Whether you are adding a decorative border for a garden or leveling a slope in your yard, building your own retaining wall may be just the right touch.

There are many styles and colors to choose from and these do-it-yourself friendly systems will yield professional results. As a homeowner, it's best to keep the wall three feet or lower, taller walls may require special reinforcements and permits and many building codes require walls higher than four feet to be designed by an engineer.

The retaining wall materials and tool list includes:

Materials	Tools
Landscape fabric	Shovel
Gravel & Paver	Tamper
Base	Level
Drainpipe	Saw
Landscape blocks	3-pound
Adhesive	sledgehammer
Brick chisel	
Caulking gun	
Safety goggles	
and Work gloves	

Since these types of blocks interlock with each other, no mortar is required. Another advantage is if you make a mistake or change your mind about the layout, simply dismantle and start over.

First determine where you will place your new wall. You can use a garden hose to make your shape or paint a line on the ground. Once you have the approximate shape, find a block best suited to the shape you've chosen. Some styles of block make curves easier and other styles make corners a snap. Keep the shape of your wall in mind when choosing your block. Pick up brochures and consult with the folks in the Garden Department of your local home improvement store. You can also find many helpful details on-line.

Now you can estimate how many blocks it will take to create your wall. Be sure to allow for cutting or breakage. The color of the blocks can vary from batch to batch, so if you have to go back and buy more blocks later, they may not match exactly. I suggest getting an extra 10% to be on the safe side.

Here's How To Do It :



Step 1

Dig the trench as deep and wide as the manufacturer recommends, making note of recommendations regarding the frost line in your area. Use a mason's line as a guide to make sure the wall is being built straight.

Step 2

Line the trench with landscape fabric. Unroll a piece of landscape fabric and lay it on the floor where you will build the simple wall. Allow enough to fold back over the trench area, plus an additional 3 inches, and cut to this length.



Step 3

Lay the first course of blocks. Cover the landscape fabric with 2 to 3 inches of gravel or paver base and tamp it. Lay the first course in line with the mason's line. If the blocks are set lip-up, leveling them and laying later courses is easier. Check for level and add or remove gravel as necessary.



Step 4

Lay a second course of blocks with their lips pointing down over the back of the wall. Check again to make sure they are level and make any needed adjustments. Lay a third course of blocks the same way, leaving an exit point for drainpipe at one end of the wall.

Step 5

Before starting to build corners and sidewalls, add gravel for the drainpipe behind the placed blocks. Slope the gravel about 1 inch for every 4 feet, checking with a 4-foot level set on a board with a 1-inch spacer under the downhill end. Lay the drainpipe on the gravel.

Step 6

Run the drainpipe to the point where it can exit the ground. Backfill with gravel behind the wall until the drainpipe is covered. Tamp the gravel firmly.



Step 7

Split the blocks for corners. For a 90-degree corner or the end of a straight run, you'll need to cut blocks. Score a full block with a circular saw and a masonry blade, then split the block at the scored line by striking it with a brick chisel and 3-pound

sledgehammer.

Step 8

Build the corners. Place the half blocks on alternate sides of the corner so they overlap. Chisel the lip off a block if it interferes with construction, then secure the block with a bead of construction adhesive.

Step 9

Alternate half and full blocks at the end of a straight run. Place the half block so the cut edge is on the outside end of the course.

Continue building the wall, adding gravel and tamping after every few courses.



Step 10

A course or two below the top of the wall fold the landscape fabric back over the gravel and trim off any excess. To help secure the top course of blocks, apply construction adhesive using a caulking gun and lay the top course. Press down firmly on each block.

Step 11

Backfill with soil behind and in front of the wall and tamp the soil firmly. Then add plants and mulch for a professional finished look. Sit back, relax and enjoy your new landscape.

If you have any questions about this how-to project, or any other home improvement projects, e-mail me at ron.specht@yourhomecolumbus.com.