



# That Old Time Rock & Roll

Landscape Contractors Mix Old/New Techniques for Hardscapes

*by Sherwood Smith*

SOME OF THE MOST DISTINCTIVE AND INTERESTING COMPONENTS OF ANY LANDSCAPING PROJECT CONSIST OF WELL-EXECUTED HARDSCAPES, PARTICULARLY THOSE CONSTRUCTED WITH NATURAL STONE. FROM WIDE STONE TERRACES TO PONDS AND WATERSCAPES TO FIELDSTONE WALLS, THE "STRUCTURE OF THE LANDSCAPE" IS THE BACKBONE UPON WHICH A PROJECT SUCCEEDS OR FAILS.

**C**raig Swoish of Northern Boulder Company in Northville, a wholesale dealer of fieldstone, grindstone and limestone, is seeing a significant increase in sales of natural stone products. Swoish attributes this growth in residential sales to three basic causes. First, people in Michigan are moving into hillier suburbs and areas. They need rock retaining walls to secure the land grade

and end up using stone throughout the project. Homeowners tend to find the rounded features of natural stone to be very harmonious with the surrounding environment. Second, homeowners are spending an increasingly large amount of their total budget on the landscape component of a new home. According to Swoish, the rule of thumb in the past said that about 10% of the cost of a new home went toward

landscaping. Today, it is not unusual for that number to be 20–25% of the overall project. Homeowners, many of them high-earning baby boomers, are making this additional investment in ponds and waterfalls and other features that require natural stone. Finally, hardscape is a permanent high ticket fixture of a new house and as such its cost can very often be rolled into the new mortgage.



Michigan Landscapers increasingly use boulders for structure and accents.

Many choices of stone products are available to today's landscaper.



and his crew hand-load them into a skid steer bucket. Because a bucket can inadvertently scoop up dirt along with bigger rocks, these larger boulders are manipulated onto pallet forks, sometimes with the help of chains and straps if moving over varied terrain. The process isn't perfect, but it works. On occasion, Bueche makes use of a truck-mounted crane to get at hard-to-reach places. When asked about specialty attachments and equipment, Bueche remarks "Well, I've thought about purchasing an excavator, but the expense is holding me back. I have to be sure that I'll really put something to use before I can make that kind of investment."

One innovation that does seem to be catching on is Rock Jaw, a new product manufactured by a company of the

same name in Charlevoix, Michigan. A Rock Jaw is a relatively simple steel attachment that chains to a boom or bucket of any piece of equipment, whether tractor or large excavator. The attachment can grip a rock up to 42" in diameter, and its offset arms use gravity, requiring no additional hydraulics. It also allows the user to turn the rock 360 degrees which helps put the rock's best side forward into a wall or pond. Rock Jaws cost approximately \$1,200 apiece. Doug Byl of Stout Creek Landscapes, Inc. in Belmont recently purchased a Rock Jaw. Mr. Byl remarks, "We were using pallet forks to move rocks around and place them onsite. However, we're getting into more ponds and water features. When we drop rocks off the forks, they can tumble down from our intended spot or even puncture

the liner. We also have had problems building retaining walls from up above. This Rock Jaw gives us more flexibility, and I can use it for all of my equipment, not just one machine." Byl feels that the productivity he will gain from the Rock Jaw will allow him to recoup his investment in short order.

As the technology for hardscape installations matures, so does the variety of stones that landscapers are using. Northern Boulder is getting requests for Mojave ledge limestone, worm rock, and pudding stone, as well as classic limestone and grindstone. As the demand and the options for stone products continue to grow, Michigan landscapers will need to come to terms with what will always be hard and challenging work. It may be that a small investment in equipment can help. ♻️



Rock Jaw™ attaches to any size equipment. Rotates 360 degrees.

Moving boulders with buckets brings extra debris. Forks lift cleanly.



***Growth in stone sales for commercial projects also appears to be robust.***

A recent survey of several MNLA members showed that increased use of stone products has not brought many efficiencies. Installing hardscapes continues to be one of the most challenging aspects of the landscaping business. Building stone installations requires a combination of intense labor, patience and/or specialized equipment. As Brian MacDonnell of Traverse Outdoor in Traverse City comments, “Anytime you are dealing with stone, you have labor issues. I recently had a project in which we moved 40 tons of boulders and outcropping steps wheelbarrow by wheelbarrow on site. It was a nightmare.”

A host of new products and attachments have been introduced to help contractors with moving and setting rocks. Those landscape professionals with excavators, mini-excavators and backhoes are probably familiar with hydraulic thumbs that allow buckets to close over objects such as boulders, stumps and logs. Using a thumb to grip boulders against a bucket allows the operator to move and set rocks that are significantly larger than the bucket itself. On the other hand, thumbs do require auxiliary hydraulics and are typically not used for the skid steers and other small loaders favored by many landscapers.

For those with skid steers and other light-duty loaders, many equipment dealers do carry specialized rock grapples or fork grapples with two

or more tongs. These tend to run in the \$1,800-\$3,500 price range. Rock grapples can be very effective for long dedicated rock moving tasks. Those who have to perform multiple tasks during a shift, however, tend to find that having a dedicated gripping attachment gets in the way of backfilling, and transporting loose material.

Even with the huge selection of available attachments for setting rocks, almost all of the MNLA landscapers we spoke to are still doing things using basic equipment. Larry Bueche of Bueche Landscaping in Troy is typical of the mainstream of full-service contractors. He has two skid steer loaders – one bigger, one smaller – that perform a hundred utility functions on site, including moving and setting boulders. For smaller rocks, Bueche