

ASK THE BUILDER

Q: I have a cement sidewalk. It really looks plain. Is there any way to make it look better or should I just replace it?

Cement has come a long way since it was first used in driveways and sidewalks. In fact cement has been around for almost 12 million years according to the Department of Materials Science and Engineering at the University of Illinois. Today there are a lot of options to improve the look of a basic concrete surface. These new treatments are cost effective versus the laborious expense of removing and replacing your existing one. Some of these treatments are perfect for the do-it-yourselfer. Let me tell you about a few.

The first one is a concrete stain. Stains chemically react with the lime in concrete. It is relatively simple to apply and can be sprayed on in two to three coats using a garden sprayer. Then a sealer can be applied with a paint roller. The result is a durable, long lasting mottled look that will last for years. You can use different colored stains to give you a multicolored looking concrete.

The second process is called “scoring”. Scoring is done with a concrete cutting machine. Use a chalk line to make lines on the concrete. The chalk lines can be laid out to give you a “tile” look. The tile look can be square which is the easiest or you can create a complicated series of rectangles and squares. Then you make a shallow 1/8” cut in the surface of the concrete where you marked the concrete with the chalk lines. A concrete cutting machine can be rented from a local rental company. Make sure you feel comfortable with using this tool. Better yet hire a professional.

A third process is called surface overlay. A thin layer of cement or other material can be applied to the surface of the concrete. This material can not only be used to repair cracks. It can also be used to bring a textured look to the concrete surface. These products are troweled on to the surface. The colors are endless and the application fairly simple for the homeowner. After drying, a sealer must then be applied using a sprayer or roller.

When using stains and overlays you need to prepare the concrete properly. Have the surface media or bead blasted, and then power washed. If the surface has a broom finish; it is possible to just power-washed with a minimum 3000psi power washer. The power washing process would also be sufficient when using a surface overlay. Most importantly, read the manufacturers instructions prior to using their products.

If these ideas aren't what you have in mind; consider having the walkway removed and installing a colored or stamped concrete. There is also the option of pavers or possibly flagstone. A less expensive option could be using a flexible garden border and filling in the walkway with decomposed granite, gravel or bark.

Hope this provides you with a few ideas for your sidewalk. As you can see there are plenty of cost effective options.