

Border Control

by Patrick White

Concrete curbs provide permanent edgings for landscapes

While sprawling paver patios and intricate stone walls make a statement, sometimes it's the smaller details that can really "make" a landscape, especially when those details are attractive and functional.

Continuous concrete borders fall into that category. These extruded concrete edges keep mulch or rocks in place in landscape beds, border parking lots or walkways and serve other edging needs. "It makes it easier to trim around beds. There's no black plastic edging to get pushed up, and it just makes the landscape look a lot better," says Tim Kuntz, owner of GUYS Curbing (www.guyscurbing.com) in Minnesota. The company offers general landscape services, such as walkway/patio construction, but focuses primarily on concrete curbing.

Kuntz purchased the necessary equipment for concrete border installation, including a self-contained trailer system and the curbing machine, from **Tygar Manufacturing** (www.tygarmfg.com). "It's pretty much a turnkey package. All the tools go in the trailer, and there's a mixer on the back and a large bin for the sand. You just throw the sand in, add cement and water and coloring, and it's ready to mix right on the back of the trailer," he explains.

Kuntz says he's had no trouble finding local sources of sand, cement (basic portland cement) and coloring. A fiber mesh is added to the mix for strength. Once mixed, he uses a wheelbarrow to move batches from the trailer to the curbing machine that's set up in place. From there, the walk-behind unit does the rest. "There's a piston that goes back and forth and basically compresses the concrete, and then extrudes it out the form," he explains. A small amount of hand-trowel work is typically required after the machine completes its job.

He explained that the machine accepts different forms to produce various curbing shapes. That, combined with the ability to add coloring into the mix and even surface patterns after the curbing has been created, offers the chance to customize each application based on customer preference. He says, "I sit down with the customer prior to installation to review the various options."

There are different techniques to add the pattern, he says, "depending on how extravagant you want to get with it. We extrude the concrete and then, if the customer wants a pattern, we put a release agent (a real fine powder) over top of the curbing and then roll in the pattern and, finally, go back and rinse off as much or as little as is needed to get the look we're after."

There are some tricks that have to be picked up for a successful curbing installation, he acknowledges. "The concrete has to be pretty dry; it's a 'zero-slump' mix. The mix has to be pretty precise: too little water and you can't work with it; too much and it just slumps down on you," he says. "It takes quite a bit of practice and some on-the-job training to get it right."

The final step is to apply a sealer. "Like any concrete, it's a good idea to seal it in the future, as well, even every year or two. Like any concrete, if water penetrates the surface during the freeze/thaw cycle, it can cause damage," Kuntz says.

Freezing and thawing isn't much of a concern in the desert Southwest, but there is strong demand there, as well, for concrete borders. "We see quite a bit of interest in it," says Ericka Udall with Sherwood Landscape Construction (www.sherwoodlandscapeconstruction.com) in Arizona. "Many people who get sod put down want this type of curbing around it. It's more permanent and solid than a plastic or brick border. We offer three different styles, and then different colors, as well," she says. "You want a level surface, but that's about all the preparation that's required. We can usually have the job done in less than a day."

In the Southeast, Ben Andrews, with North Carolina-based Coastal Curbing (www.obxcurb.com), says he got into the concrete curbing business as a way to carve out a niche market. "I'd been in the landscape business for quite a while, and I was always looking for a good, permanent border between grass and flowerbeds. I looked into concrete borders and was really impressed with them. And, where I am, there isn't a lot of other companies offering this service."

Andrews also purchased a system from **Tygar Manufacturing**. "It was a turnkey package, but there were no franchise fees involved," he explains. "I went to a training seminar, but after a few jobs you start to learn the ins and outs of what's involved."

Andrews handles both residential and commercial concrete border installations. The installation technique varies slightly, depending on the application. He explains, "If it's a commercial curb for a parking lot, for example, there are building codes to follow, and you need to add rebar. If it's just a decorative item around flower beds, it's the same procedure as with a residential installation."

The process usually begins with cutting out an 8-inch strip of sod. "If the soil is really sandy, I compact it, but many times it can go right on the surface," says Andrews. The work is pretty straightforward, he says, "But you really need at least two people. On a bigger job it helps to have three or four people." His company usually puts down about 200 to 300 feet of curbing per day, but he says a four-man crew working quickly could install 600 feet. "Because it's extruded out of the machine rather than having to use forms, it's a pretty quick process," Andrews says. "We're usually in and out in one day."

On new landscape installations, Andrews prefers to put in the curbing after all the other work has been completed. "That allows you to really see where the curbing needs to go. And, the equipment isn't heavy at all, so there's no damage done; it doesn't disturb the landscape." He offers other landscape contractors who don't install concrete borders an incentive for referring him. He says, "I'll pay them something like \$1 per foot. I'm not trying to compete with them, I'm trying to work with them."

In North Carolina, Andrews cuts expansion joints about every 4 feet to reduce the chances of the border cracking. In Minnesota, where the weather is colder, Tim Kuntz cuts joints about every 2 feet. He says, "It's just a matter of putting a small cut in the curb; you don't even need to cut all the way through. That tends to control any cracking, and if it does crack, it will crack in that spot." He notes that concrete curbing doesn't lift or heave in the frost.

For those interested in getting into the concrete curbing business, but don't want to go it alone, there are several national firms that offer franchise opportunities. "The big advantage we offer is support," says Tyler Evans, development coordinator with Border Magic (www.bordermagic.com), which offers franchise opportunities nation-wide. Not all applicants are awarded franchises, but those who are qualified and receive a franchise get a minimum of three days of training at the Border Magic headquarters and the franchisee's location. "The training is individualized, not a big group training. We can tailor the training to them," says Evans.

Border Magic also provides all the necessary equipment, from a trailer to the extruder machine. "New franchisees get five molds included, and we have over 30 molds available," says Evans. The company can even custom fabricate molds if a customer demands a particular concrete border shape. And, because it's nationwide, it provides contacts for local suppliers of items such as the specific sand required for the concrete curbs.

Border Magic also supplies marketing support. "We offer hats, T-shirts, jackets, literature, help with home show displays, business cards, letterhead, everything they need," says Evans. The company has contracts with some other national franchise companies, such as Burger King and McDonald's, so Border Magic franchisees have instant built-in business in some cases.

Finally, says Evans, working with a national company provides access to ongoing research and development. "Currently, we're working on a material that would go in the concrete mix that would provide the ability to install borders earlier in the spring and later in the fall in an effort to lengthen our franchisees' work seasons." The company is also developing a larger, commercially oriented extruder machine that can install curbs and gutters in streets.

Whether operating independently or as part of a franchise, concrete borders offer an opportunity to expand your business. "I wouldn't say it's a blast, but installing the concrete curbs is actually somewhat fun to do," says Kuntz, "and the customers love it. I haven't had one yet who has been disappointed."

Patrick White is a freelance writer based in Middlesex, Vt. Over the past 13 years he has covered hundreds of landscape installation and maintenance projects around the country, with an eye on documenting the tools and techniques used and spreading the word about innovative ideas. He is always on the lookout for unusual stories and cutting-edge installations.