



No Walls

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In Berlin on June 12, 1987, President Ronald Reagan told Russia's General Secretary Gorbachev: *"...if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity ... Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"*

What does this have to do with landscaping? Retaining walls seem to be popping up in residential landscapes like the Berlin wall stifled life during its existence. If you have been considering adding a retaining wall to your landscape, think about the liabilities as well as the benefits and you probably won't build one. There are options.

When it comes to developing a sustainable landscape, retaining walls are rarely included in plans from Eco-Building & Forestry. They are, quite simply, not needed and are extremely expensive. A small, simple 25-foot long retaining wall six feet high will cost at least \$3,000 if you hire it done, without any vegetation added.

The bricks or stones used in retaining walls require huge amounts of energy to manufacture or mine. They usually have to be shipped over considerable distances and, in many cases, the walls are not safe.

Retaining walls are attractive to property owners and landscaping companies because they assemble as easily as a child's snap-together toy blocks. Once the site is

prepared, there's no real skill involved in putting them up once you start stacking. Is the cost worth the convenience? No!

Many homeowners cite the need for a retaining wall because the elevations change within their landscape. Yet they add a retaining wall and cover it with vegetation so it becomes an expensive addition no one sees. Would you be surprised to learn that replacing a retaining wall built with old railroad ties could run as high as \$30,000? Railroad ties were never intended to have contact with soil. They decay quite rapidly and leave property owners with the double whammy of finding some way to dispose of creosote-treated lumber and having to replace the wall with something else.

Retaining walls are not required to hold soil in place! An area can be sloped to as high as a 45-degree angle with soil-holding plants that look great and add other benefits, eliminating the need for expensive stonewalling. Plant roots hold soil in place and organic mulches serve as sponges to reduce soil erosion.

Would you build a new home with a walkout basement where the retaining wall cost more than the basement? Would you knowingly put an eight-foot retaining wall with a drop-off right next to a patio where you entertain friends or your children play? Why would you spend your entire landscape budget on stark concrete blocks or stone?

Granted, some people like the looks of stone retaining walls. It can look nice in some situations, but it's also worth investigating the cost of using fill instead of stone, concrete, or block. Most soils can hold a 45-degree slope with the proper vegetation.

Some other things to think about: Will your retaining wall be installed on undisturbed soil? Backfill always settles, and that can turn a perfectly level wall into a

slumping mess - no matter how much the soil is compacted. Clay soils expand and contract, which can also move your wall around.

Will you put rails or fences around retaining walls that are more than two-feet tall so you don't have a tragic accident when someone steps over that edge?

How do you feel about mice, chipmunks, and snakes? If you use rocks for your retaining wall, the crevices create great habitats for these creatures. You'll want to keep the snakes to help control the mice and chipmunk population!

Let the experts at Eco-Building & Forestry help you determine if you truly need a retaining wall on your property. There are usually options that fit your lifestyle, and your budget. Do it right. Contact us today about sustainable landscaping to fit your lifestyle.