

The landscaping scene in El Paso, Texas, is getting rocky, and Joe Lomeli has gotten used to it. In fact, he thrives on it. He specializes in landscaping with rocks, both on large commercial jobs and small residential projects.

There are basically three types of rock jobs, says Lomeli, who is president of J & J Landscaping. There's the crushed rock lawn, rock walls and flagstone walkways. Crushed rock is by far his biggest money-maker now.

"To do a rock landscaping you can either lay down a sheet of plastic or a fabric material," he says. That creates a foundation and suppresses weeds. "You don't want water penetration."

There's also the herbicide option, and Lomeli uses Surflan for this purpose occasionally. The problem, he says, is that chemicals only last a few months at best.

Lomeli gives his customers the choice of 4mm, 6mm or 10mm black polyethylene. That gives them a price option, though he carefully points out to them that the heavier sheet is going to last longer.

"It's how you maintain the plastic," he says, though. Even 4mm poly will last for years if properly laid and covered.

J & J Landscaping does some pretty large areas with crushed rock—the new U.S. Postal Service processing and distribu-



Joe Lomeli of J & J Landscaping in El Paso shows how a rock landscaping job can be attractive and practical. His materials of choice are crushed rock and flagstones.

Rockscaping

"We're in a desert. We do the desert landscaping—very little grass, mainly rocks, and very few plants."

tion center, for example—and he tries to insist that a layer of chat, or finely pulverized rock, be laid down under the rock.

"To do a quality job you'd want to do these phases," he says. The chat provides a cushion between the rock and plastic, preventing tears or punctures from traffic.

When he excavates a job he goes down four inches, leaving enough room for the plastic, two inches of chat and two inches of crushed rock. He uses either ¾-inch or 1½-inch rock. Ninety percent of El Paso jobs are Mt. Franklin crushed rock, a local rock, though he offers a variety such as lava

rock or white crystal rock.

"The prices vary tremendously," he says. Mt. Franklin rock is \$20 per ton, while white crystal is \$38.

Lomeli is a great believer in the Bobcat loader. He owns four of them, using them

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to spread crushed rock.

"Very little labor is involved," he says. "The Bobcat can really facilitate a job." He uses the medium-weight 843 model for spreading rock.

Little labor needed

On a job the size of the post office facility, which has two acres of crushed rock or gravel and no grass, his work crew will still consist only of six people at the most.

"You've got two guys putting plastic down, guys putting chat down, guys grading. And then you've got the plants."

Lomeli prefers to put down his plastic and cut it in place to install shrubs and trees. It is less messy than planting vegetation and doing a lot of cutting to get the plastic over it.

Lomeli points out that grading prior to plastic application is also important, especially on hills or berms. He doesn't want

drastic slopes which could cause plastic or rock to slip down the grade.

The other cover option, fiber, doesn't require chat under the rock. It's more durable, but also more expensive. The same 2,000 square foot roll of plastic and fiber can show a cost differential of some \$150.

"This will allow water penetration," he says of the fiber. That is good for trees that have fibrous root systems, because they can benefit from rainwater. The fibrous mat will still not allow weeds to emerge.

Lomeli has used fiber such as Geotextile, Typar and DeWitt, and recommends them if money is not a factor. They generally avoid disasters such as unsightly torn plastic popping through the rock.

Rock walls comprise much less of the business of the company, which restricts its work to residential ornamental and not structural walls—which are usually built by

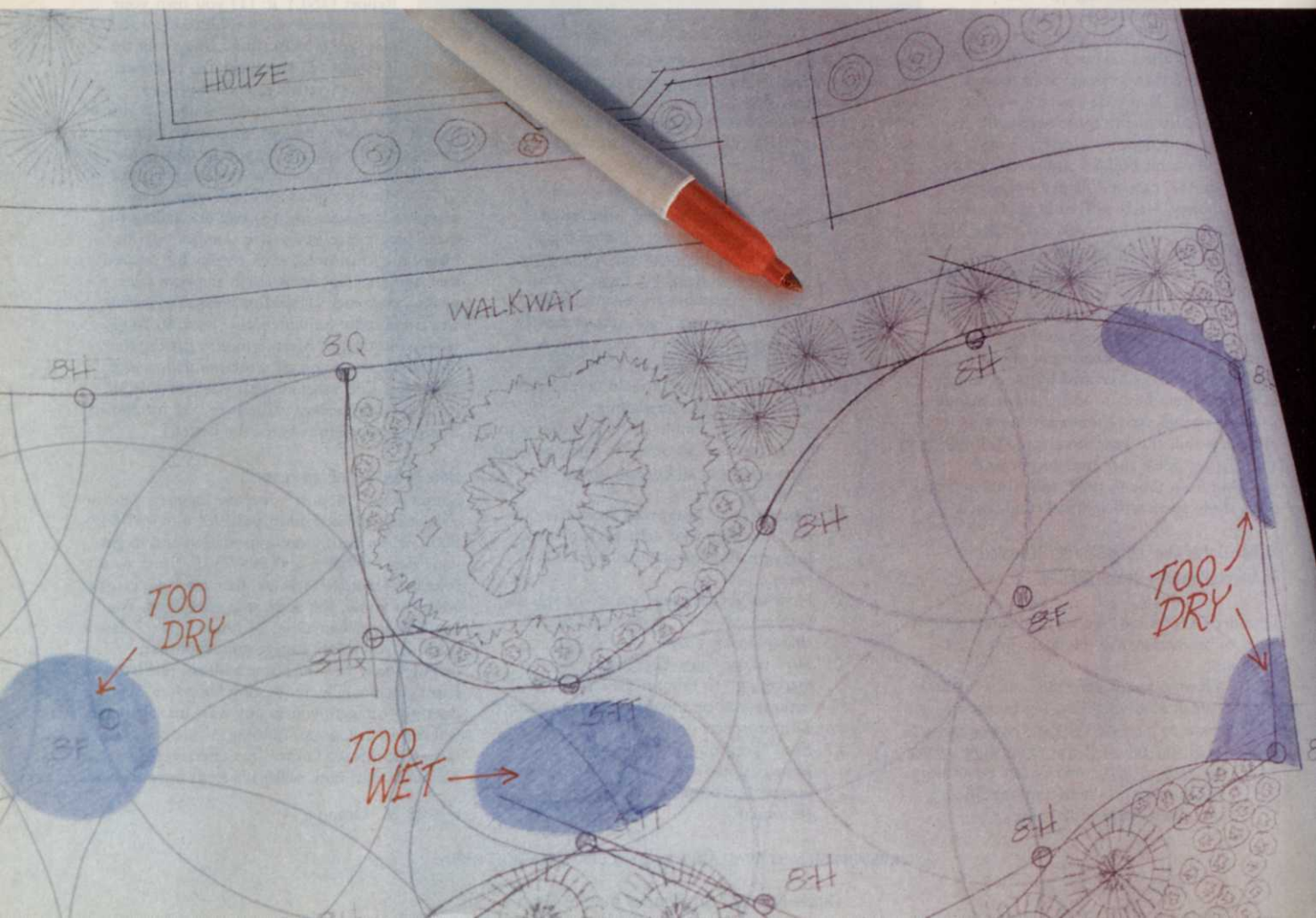
the original contractor anyway. He doesn't need to get a permit to build an ornamental wall less than two feet high.

"You need good masons for that," he says. "I've got a mason on every crew."

J & J's first mason was George Muniz, who still works for the company, and he has taught the other four masons the craft. He utilizes a system of mortaring the interior of the wall so the mortar doesn't show much. Mortar is also colored with concrete pigment to match the rocks.

"You can do a six-inch footing and lay your rock wall," Lomeli says. He also does a lot of work adding short ornamental walls to the tops of structural walls, and caps that with brick. The typical rock wall has no rebar support, though columns require rebar because of their height.

The company also lays a lot of brick borders around planters, walkways and other ornamental features.





Lomeli shows where the underlayer of chat gives way to the surface layer of gravel at the U.S. Postal Service distribution center.

Flagstone walkways are done in the traditional manner, placing stone over a bed of sand and filling in the niches with grout. No foundation is necessary on solid soil, and an inch of sand is usually plenty to allow leveling of the stones.

Boulders popular

"We use a lot of boulders," Lomeli adds. Accenting boulders, from hand-carried to forklift size, round out his repertoire of rock construction.

Lomeli, who hires 32 employees and does \$1.75 million in business every year, says that rocks have become the in-thing with both residential and commercial designers in El Paso. And in all desert areas of the U.S.

Some of his jobs feature all three types of rock construction, plus boulders. Many older El Paso neighborhoods have more rock lawns than turf lawns now, and more homeowners are converting every day.

"Rock landscaping goes real quick," he points out, making it advantageous to the contractor. "We can hop to another job and don't have to come back."

Lomeli, who designs most of his own rock jobs, estimates that rocks represent 90 percent of his work now, and that is climbing. The huge new Post Office facility, for example, has no grass and only a few shrubs out front.

Thus, irrigation systems are generally minimal under rock, and most irrigation installed is drip. Any desert plants that are installed are generally expected to survive on native rainfall. **LM**

—Story and photos by Don Dale

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