

Our cast
of reader
experts



GERRY POMANTI
Master plumber with
Comstock Canada Ltd.,
in Thunder Bay, Ontario.
Years in the trade: 33



MICHAEL BOND
General contractor; owner
of MLB Construction in
Needham, Massachusetts.
Years in the trade: 25



MAURICE TURGEON
Master electrician; owner of
The Semi-Retired Electrician,
in Wilsonville, Alabama.
Years in the trade: 50+



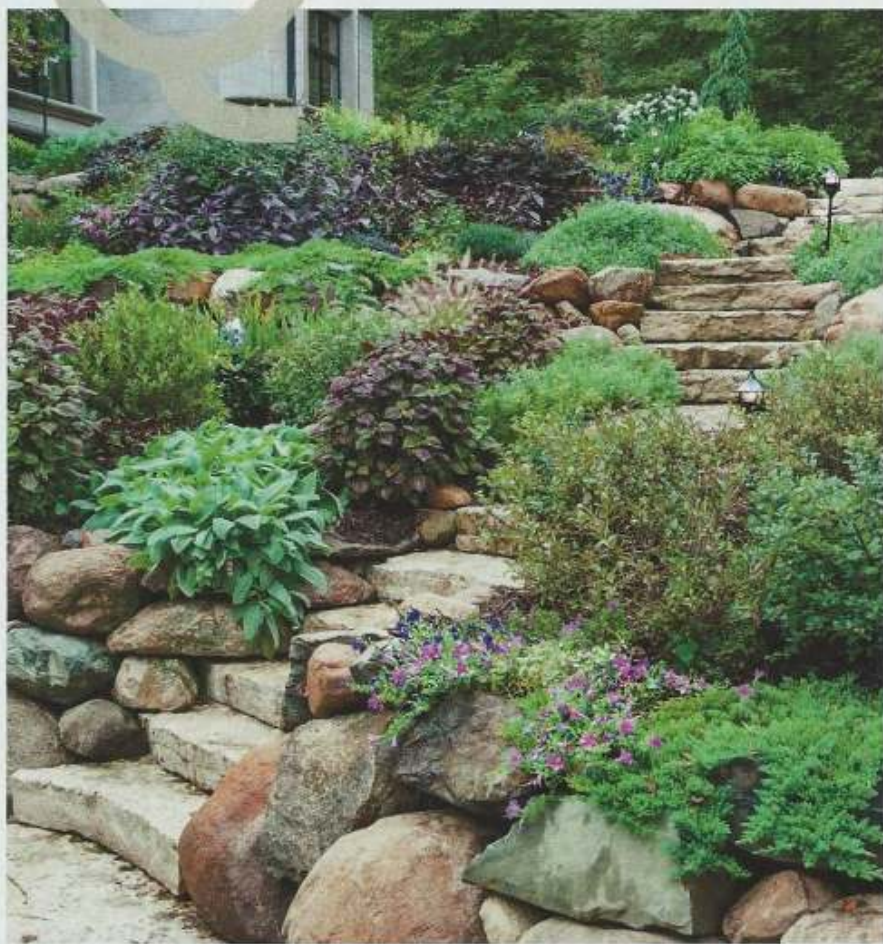
TED CARTER
Landscape designer; owner
of Ted Carter Inspired
Landscapes, in Buxton, Maine.
Years in the trade: 40+

This issue, the *TOH* show guys are turning over the reins to a group of reader experts plucked from our online discussion boards and Facebook community. Norm, Tom, Roger, and Richard will be back next month, but if you need help with your home-improvement projects before then, go to advice.thisoldhouse.com or facebook.com/thisoldhouse to ask for answers.

A "living" wall of boulders and plants is a handsome alternative to a rot-prone retaining wall made of landscape timbers.

Our retaining walls, built in 1989 out of railroad ties, are showing signs of rot. Can we repair them or do they have to be replaced?

—ALEXANDRA KANTARDJIEFF, CARY, N.C.



Ted Carter replies: Wood retaining walls have a life span of about 25 years, so it's definitely time to replace them. But before you run out to buy more landscape timbers, consider a sloped "living" wall of boulders and plants. Such a wall is simple to build and will never rot, but it's not a job for a spade and a wheelbarrow. You'll need to hire an excavating company that has the equipment to lift and place the stones, which can each be up to 32 inches across.

After the timbers are taken away and the earth behind them is graded to a reasonable pitch, the excavating contractor will cover the soil loosely with heavy-duty landscape fabric and press the boulders in place. You can fill in the open pockets between the stones with loam and mulch and cut a hole through the fabric to make way for roots wherever you plant something.

Look for plants that are low-growing and easy to care for, such as cotoneaster, sedum, creeping juniper, and climbing hydrangea.



ROGER COOK

COMMENTS: Another alternative, if you prefer to do it yourself, is to build a retaining wall from

interlocking concrete blocks. They don't look as natural as boulders, but they won't rot like railroad ties.

Q Floor not level

After gutting our bathroom, I discovered the subfloor isn't level. How do I fix it before I start tiling?

—PETER FRANCIUK, STERLING HEIGHTS, MICH.

Michael Bond replies: If your floor is out of level by less than an inch or is slightly wavy, you can use floor

Avoid the boring grimness of an ivy mat (RIGHT) by planting these shade-tolerant alternatives (BELOW, FROM LEFT): barren strawberry, Siberian carpet cypress, and climbing hydrangea.



leveler, a type of concrete that has the consistency of pancake batter until it sets. I prefer cement-based levelers, which aren't as sensitive to moisture as gypsum-based levelers.

Fasten a strip of wood across the doorway to contain the leveler, then use a mixing paddle and a heavy-duty drill to blend the leveler with water to a creamy consistency. Pour it on the floor in closely spaced dollops, which will flow into one another and harden into a smooth and level surface. Each bag covers about 25 square feet—less if the floor's profile varies by more than ¼ inch. Screw concrete or fiber-cement backer board to the cured, leveled floor, and do your tiling.

If your floor is more than an inch out of level, pull up the subfloor and fasten—or "sister"—new joists to the existing ones with construction adhesive and deck screws. Use a 4-foot level to check that the new joists are level. Top them with ¾-inch plywood subfloor, followed by backer board, and then tile.

Q Ivy invasion

The ivy originally planted to prevent erosion behind my house has completely taken over and

needs to go. Can you tell us how to get rid of it, and which low-maintenance plants to use instead?
—ANGELA LECHTENBERG, COLUMBIA, MO.

Ted Carter replies: Ivy isn't deeply rooted, so the best way to remove it is to simply dig it out using sharp spades. Once you get under the ivy root mat, you should be able to cut and roll it up like sod.

You don't say what the exposure is, but, assuming it's a shaded area, consider replacing the ivy with Siberian carpet cypress (*Microbiota decussata*). It's a tough, drought-resistant evergreen with soft, juniper-like foliage and good soil-retention ability. And unlike most conifers, it tolerates some shade. A good companion plant to the carpet cypress is barren strawberry (*Waldsteinia ternata*), an easy-to-care-for perennial groundcover with lobed foliage and a splash of yellow flowers in spring. If you want to keep a vine in this landscape, climbing hydrangea (*Hydrangea petiolaris*) is a clean, architectural alternative. It's ivy's cool uptown cousin.

After planting the new specimens, cover the exposed soil with mulch to prevent erosion until the new groundcovers take over.

