Softening Edges

By Steve Sandalis

Among all of the elements defining superior naturalistic watershapes, accomplished pond/stream specialists know that edge treatments are generally what separates great work from the ordinary. Here, watershaper Steve Sandalis highlights these transitions, sharing techniques he uses to soften edges and create areas where grassy verges, plants, beaches and rocks combine to make impressions in various and seamlessly beautiful ways.

We recently completed a project that truly thrilled a pair of well-traveled, highly educated clients: It was a large, complex waterfall-and-pond composition in the sloping backyard of an upscale home in an affluent southern California neighborhood.

There were a number of reasons why the project worked so well, but if I had to break it down to one thing more than any other, it had to do with the range of edge treatments we used within the available space.

On the side nearest the house, we established a clean lawn-meets-water detail – very disciplined in appearance and obviously man-made. Directly across the pond was a set of rugged waterfalls – much wilder and basically untamed. Bracketing those features, we filled shallow areas with emergent plants and hiding places for fish and frogs.

It was a well-thought-out plan, certainly right for the space. But I know for a fact that this success story was defined almost entirely by the edge treatments.

edgy journey

Through the past several years, I've had the pleasure of working with a number of talented pond and stream builders and have spent a fair amount of time studying the works of amazing craftspeople, including Anthony Archer Wills among several others. These watershapers have blazed amazing trails, elevating their naturalistic bodies of water to a level that can only be described as a fine art.

What you see in examining the works of these masters is that there are near-infinite levels of detail that can be applied in any composition – all of which require careful planning

and execution on site, where large doses of imagination and improvisation also come into play.

I'm proud to follow in their footsteps and love the fact that this is an art form you can spend a lifetime exploring and never run out of ways to expand your knowledge or ever completely "perfect" what you do.

Bottom line: This business of following nature as a model makes you realize that there's always *more* you can do as you try to mimic what nature does. As I see it, this is a process of expanding my understanding of the details and *layers* of details I find in natural settings and accepting the fact that, as much as I think I might know, I still have infinitely more to learn.

One set of lessons I've learned well, I think, has to do with the way I work with edges and my recognition that these transitional moments define the body of water I want to design and build. I know for a fact that our eyes are drawn to these borderlines between the water and the land and that the configuration of these interfaces is basically what tells us we're looking at a pond, a swimming pool, a beach, a riverfront, a reservoir or an architectural waterfeature.

Certainly, there are other important details to consider, but if I had to pick just one that makes or breaks the visual success of a naturalistic body of water, it's the edge treatments.

All of this is why the dreaded "string-of-pearls" appearance is so abominable: Nature simply does not line up evenly sized rocks along the water's edge, so whenever I see an edge that's finished that way, I immediately know that it's "man-made" and that the person who did the making really wasn't all that sharp. (If I could wave a magic wand and somehow fix just one thing that too many watershapers do wrong, this would be my personal choice.)

Some say that their clients have demanded this look, but that contention makes me suspicious every time I hear it, because whenever I show clients what we can achieve by varying the edge treatments, they always want the more refined look and what I call its "soft edges."

grassy lines

When I talk with clients about soft edges, what I'm really doing is leading them away from any thoughts of strings of pearls.

The simplest of these approaches – in visual terms, at least – involves bringing grass right to the water's edge. This can look artificial because of the precise lines that are usually drawn, but when you use this strategy in conjunction with other edge treatments, it can also be quite wonderful and subtle and can convey the impression that someone has come along and tamed part of the shore fronting a longstanding body of water.

Personally, I think the world of this detail: It can draw beautiful lines where the water meets the land; enables people to walk securely right up to the edge of the water; and, in cases where the pond is going to be used for swimming, creates the most natural and easy of all possible points of entry and egress.

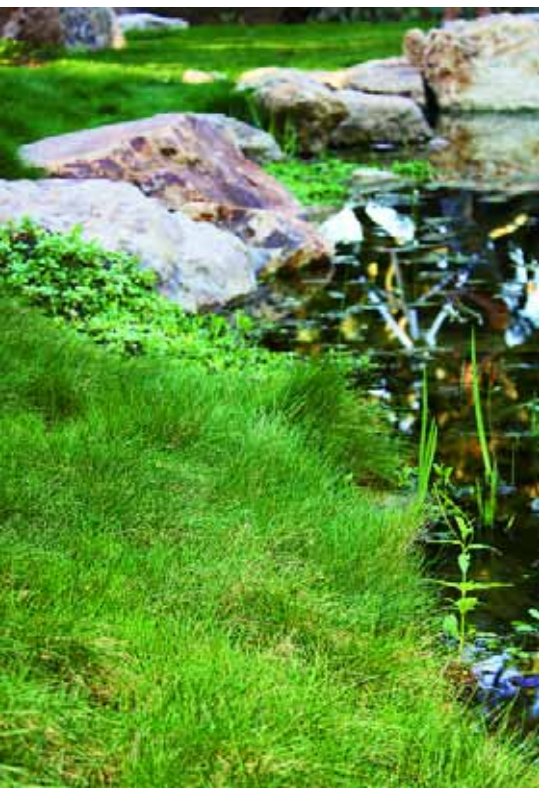
My clients seem to like this approach almost as much as I do. I've had situations where I've approached designs thinking that rockwork would play a primary role only to learn that what the homeowners want most is the look of grass on water, perhaps with some stone pieces scattered in the water and across the landscape. I liken this to the refined look to top-flight golf courses – a formal composition in which the grass represents a sort of meadow bordering the water.

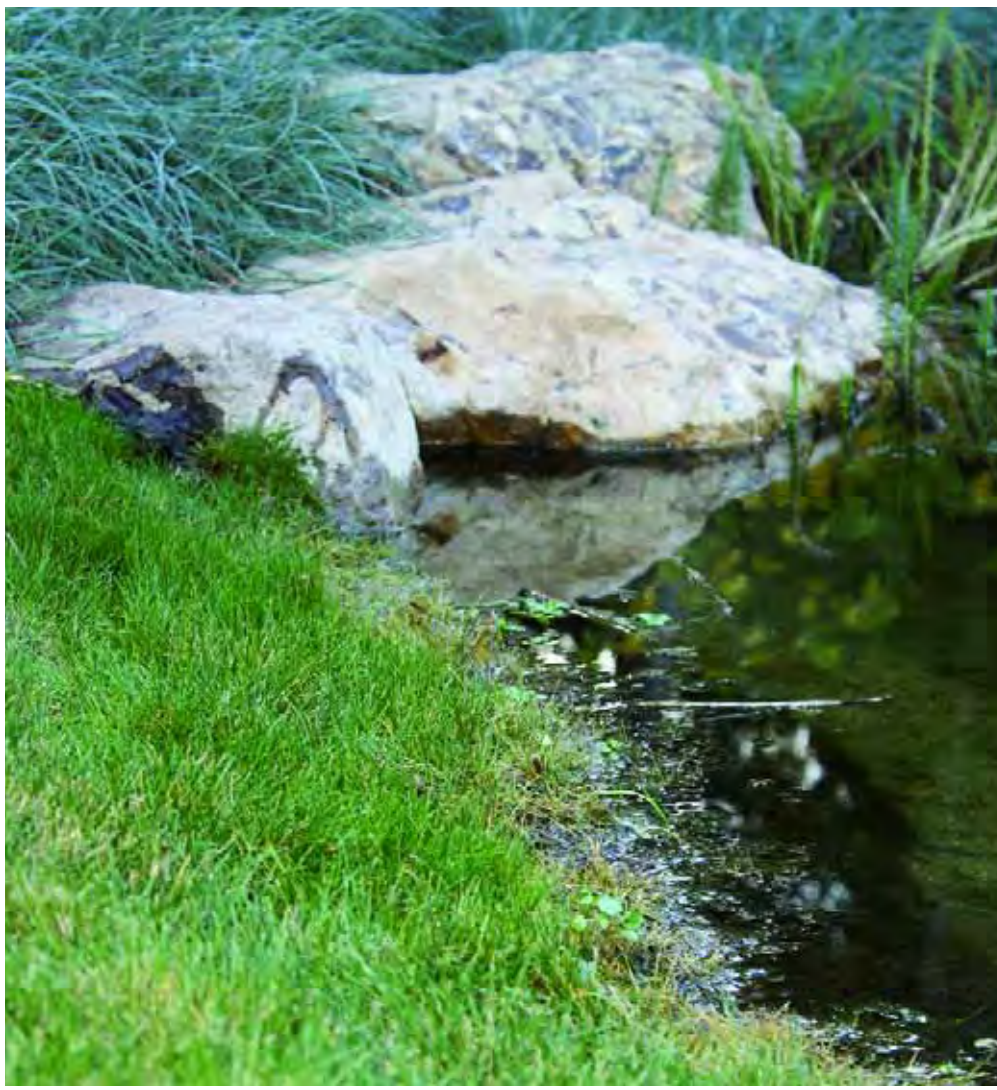
As I suggested above, this grassy look also provides wonderful contrasts to wilder edge treatments.

This leaves us, of course, with the technical challenge of establishing and maintaining these edges for the long haul – something that sounds simple to do but which can be tricky. I use two basic techniques: In one, I'll build a border structure – basically a very low retaining wall comprised of brick, stone or, in some cases, wood – and pull the liner well beyond that edge. We then create a small channel in the liner, backfilling it with soil and laying sod on top.

That's a safe, reliable approach, but it *does* leave you with a visual band around the edge that can look extremely artificial. And when you take the reflection of the edge material into account, it actually looks twice as big as it actually is. The key here is expectations: You must make certain the clients will be happy with this look.

The other approach is a bit harder to pull off but yields a far cleaner look. Here, we essentially create a shelf around the edge and build up a barrier with rocks two or three feet out into the water, just beneath the surface. After plac-





Bringing grass right down to the water is among the simplest *visual* approaches you can use in softening edges, but it's not the easiest when it comes to installation. Indeed, it's not hard to get it wrong and create an obviously artificial boundary – but when you get things right, you create the wonderfully subtle impression that someone has come along and tamed the shore of a natural body of water.

ing an underlayment and backfilling the area with sand, we contour a slope to a point up above the water's edge and bring the grass right down to it.

It's a great look, but you have be precise in the slope and in cutting the edge of the grass off right at the water level – not an easy trick for the novice.

planted transitions

An easier and certainly more flexible way to create a soft edge is to use plants. This can be accomplished in a limitless variety of ways, but the basic goal is to control the transition from aquatic to terrestrial specimens in accordance with principles observed in nature.

The key to success in this approach is proper planning of the transitional planting areas – beneath the surface, at the edge and in the adjacent landscape. This means first and foremost that you must accommodate the plants from the outset of the design process, creating a space for them that will begin taking shape in the excavation phase.

We'll often establish wide, shallow shelves: This gives us a great deal of flexibility to work with plants within the water. In smaller applications or tight spaces, however, we'll often work with planting pockets, which also can be wonderfully effective in detailing and softening the edges of rock formations.

In observing nature and by following the work of the best designers in the business, I've learned that grouping like plants in large, homogeneous areas tends to look more natural than going with a wide range of different plants every few feet. Other species might encroach upon them, but plants in the wild tend to grow in clusters.

This often leads me, in planting my edges, to use the same plant types over relatively large spans. I might establish large areas filled with rushes, dwarf cattails or irises – a durable, multi-hued favorite that offers me the advantage of coming in both aquatic and terrestrial forms. This is a spectacular way of *completely* softening the edge and even lets me create colorful marsh areas where the casual observer might not be able to tell where the water meets the land.

Plants also work wonderfully well with rock-strewn edges. Indeed, one of the

all-time classic looks – one that's been used to great effect in a wide variety of settings – involves draping various hanging, trailing plants over rockwork. It's so common an approach that I won't dwell on it here other than to note that it's easy to achieve, looks great and works well so long as you don't overdo it.

In the event, however, that you are tempted to try to use this approach to obliterate a string of pearls by interspersing plants amid the rock material, please be aware that this will *not*, even if you use large volumes of greenery, fully or successfully conceal the necklace effect.

on the beach

Sandy beaches are a far less common soft edge from those discussed above, but they fit perfectly into a certain sort

the rule of three

When it comes to planning edge treatments, there are no set rules: Every single site is different, and all of our clients have their own ideas about what they want.

For larger projects especially but for smaller ones as well, however, I think we would all do well by using more than one edge treatment as a means of bringing diversity and visual interest to our projects. I also think – and for reasons I can't completely define – that designs featuring *three* different treatments almost always seem to work out best.

Sure, you can have a pond or stream composition with only two or even four edge treatments, but there's something innately harmonious and balanced in observing the rule of three. I suppose one could get into some deep philosophical or even mystical territory in trying to pin this down; to me, it just seems to work out better than other groupings.

I've come to accept the fact that three edge treatments will do the trick to such an extent that I usually start with trios of options in my design work. I'm not inflexible about it and sometimes head in other directions, but as a point of departure, I've never found anything better.

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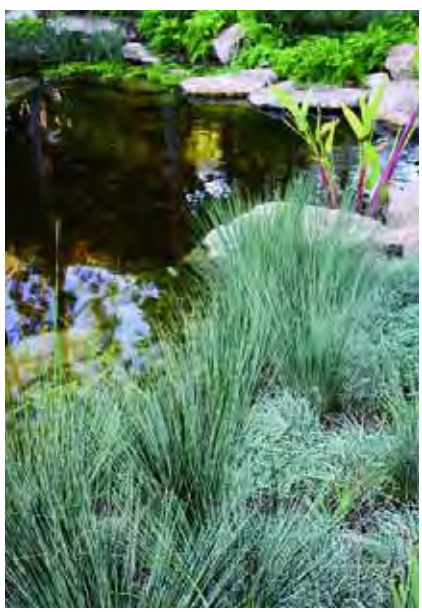
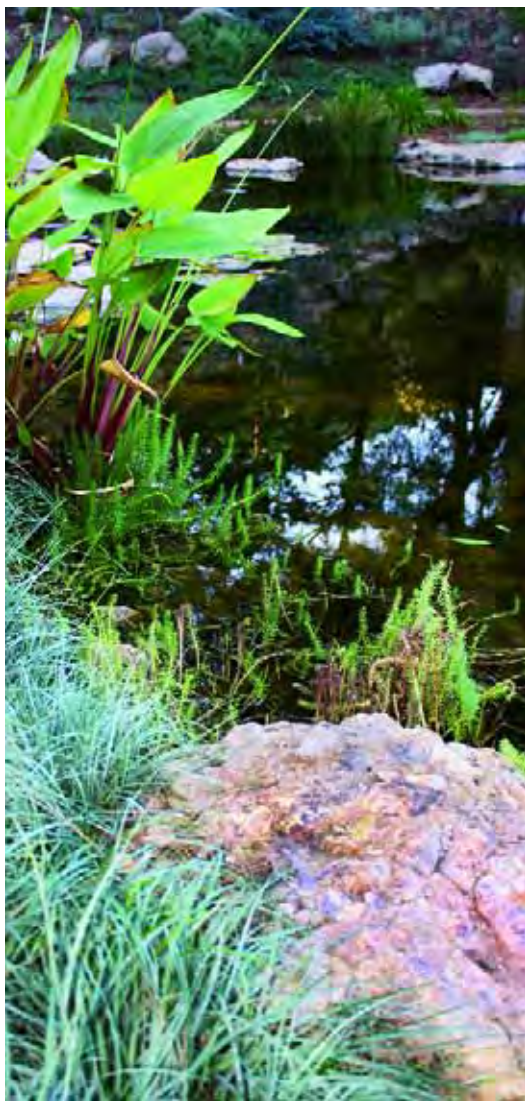




Softening edges with plants is a time-tested, flexible approach. We'll generally establish wide shelves to make these looks work, knowing that the key to success is controlling the transitions from aquatic to terrestrial species and accommodating plants beneath the surface, right at the edge and moving back into the landscape.

of project – especially when clients want to be able to swim in their ponds. These edges also provide great places for kids to wade and play in the shallow water and have a soft, distinctly familiar look that serves as a great contrast to other treatment options.

Scale is the key issue. I have seen, for example, beaches that are oversized relative to their bodies of water – so much so that they lend the setting an oppressively barren feel. By contrast, I've seen some so small that they look completely lost, out of place and unnatural. There are, unfortunately, no rules governing how much of the edge you should or shouldn't devote to a beach: It's mostly a matter of intuition when it comes to striking these important balances.

Even so, I think it's safe to say that beaches are at their best as parts of large ponds in settings where the feature can be big enough to work as a "natural" beach – without, of course, dominating the scene.

I've had success locating beaches at key focal points where the sandy area serves as a foreground for a rewarding view across the water to, say, waterfalls or large, planted areas. In this way, beaches reinforce invitations that lure observers close to (or even into) the water to enjoy the best of the visual effects you've crafted.

In building these features, it's important to establish beach areas with gentle slopes – the slighter the better. We excavate our beach areas to depths of 18 to 24 inches, then fill them with the cleanest sand we can find.

On the land side, there are several ways to create borders and transitions, whether with plants, lawns or hardscape elements. Down under the water, it's important to extend the sand area anywhere from seven to ten feet out into the pond (if not even farther), thereby avoiding sudden changes underfoot or sudden, discordant changes in subsurface appearance.

Although I've spent a bit of time here mocking the inappropriate use of rocks in edge treatments, when they're used well I see them as the perfect accent in beach areas – and, in fact, as an excellent softening measure in grassy and planted approaches as well. Stone and plants work particularly well together, so much so that I almost always use plants when-

ever I install boulders large or small.

As I see it, the art comes in varying the size and placement of these stone pieces. I love putting them out in the water, where they emerge within a few inches of the water's edge. The little shoreline channels that are created in this way can be utterly fascinating, even if they're just a few inches wide and deep.

When I use rocks in the water or on edges, I also make a point of using them in the landscape beyond. This not only serves to soften the look of rocks in the water or on the edge, but it also helps the entire composition seem more natural. (Seldom in nature do you see rock material exclusively within or outside of the water – and certainly never just along the edge!)

Partially burying boulders (usually about halfway down if not more) so that they erupt from the bottom of the pond or the surrounding ground is a tried and true way of making them look like parts of some natural subsurface formation. This is especially true if you're lucky enough to be working with specimens covered in lichen or moss or covered with erosion patterns that give the impression the material has been in place for uncounted millennia.

uncommon sense?

With every one of these edge treatments, improvisation is certainly an important part of getting the details right – but you can't start down any of these paths, no matter how seemingly direct they might seem, without planning for everything up front in the design process.

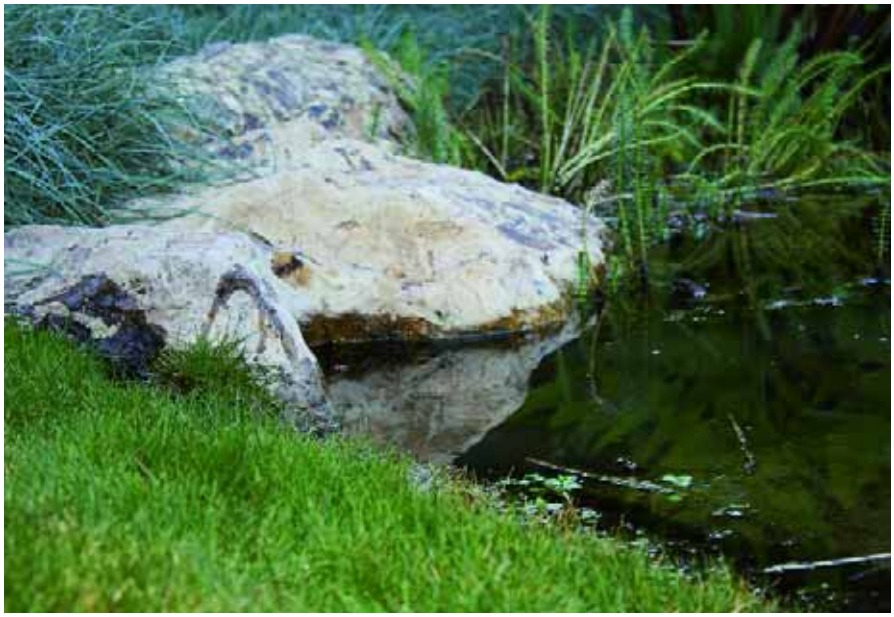
This is particularly true when large rocks come into play. In these cases, you must include broad, well-compacted shelves to support their weight, and in some cases you'll need to set up concrete substructures to carry the load. And no matter what, you must use underlayments to protect the liner from incidental damage.

In cases where a client actually wants to be able to swim or wade in a pond, setting up sandy beaches for access is generally a good way to go in both visual and practical terms. The important thing here is to establish gradual slopes and avoid sudden transitions underfoot – and not to be shy about using lots of sand (to depths of 18 to 24 inches in most cases).

If much of what I've discussed here seems like plain, common sense, that's because to a large extent it is, and I would trust that these measures are familiar to the more accomplished pond and stream specialists among you.

The uncommon skill – the one that keeps me out in nature, drives me into seminars and keeps me reading book after book – comes in developing a sense of how all of these elements flow together into single, fully integrated designs: *That* takes a certain affinity with the natural world and years spent in perfecting the tiniest details of the design and installation processes.

As I see it, the pathway to success is streamlined to a good extent simply by recognizing the central role edges play in the aesthetic results we're all trying to achieve. On a basic level, it all seems within easy reach; on another, higher level – and the one for which I think we all should strive – it's the pursuit of a lifetime.



Rocks play an important role in establishing our boundaries, and we use them with and within all of the soft-edge approaches we deploy. Often, they'll define a break between a grassy area and a planted one, for example, and we'll have them both creep out into the water and retreat into the surrounding landscape to provide visual continuity and break up any sort of string-of-pearls impression that might be made.