

THE SPIRIT OF STONE by JAN JOHNSEN
101 PRACTICAL & CREATIVE STONE SCAPING IDEAS FOR YOUR GARDEN

Reviewed by David F. Wilson

Stone inspires love & devotion—why?

What is it about this base material that fascinates those of us reading this magazine, those of us whom I affectionately call ‘the last of the dafties?’ What fiendish allure does it possess to inspire such devotion and commitment that we endure the trials, pains and financial deprivation that it sometimes brings with it?

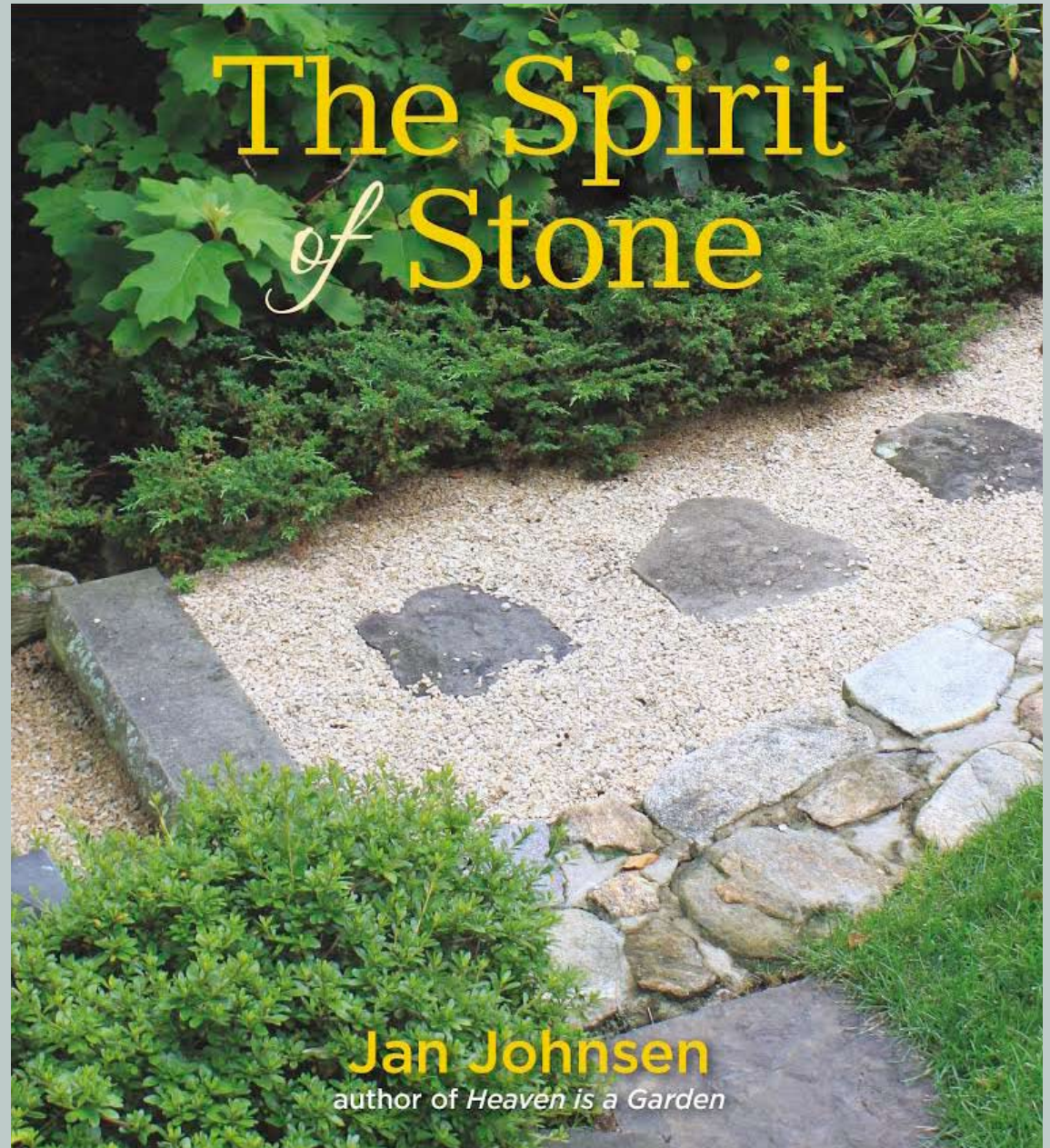
Some of these questions are answered in a welcome and timely new book to the stone canon, *The Spirit of Stone* by author Jan Johnsen, a professional landscape gardener for 40 years and an award-winning instructor at New York Botanical Gardens whose work has been featured in *Garden Design Magazine*.

Unashamedly aimed at non-professionals exploring the options of including elements of stone within their own gardens, it is filled with practical design ideas and illustrated with exemplar projects, many from gardens she herself has designed.

This book, however, is a far deeper exploration of her subject than the merely instructional and inspirational—it possesses other qualities that I find to be its main attraction and strength. Johnsen provides a passionate summation of why stone is more, why it resonates, why it appeals, why it is far from an inert lifeless material—and, importantly, why it should still be a material of choice in our environment.

Jan’s love for stone was initiated and fostered by the period she spent in Japan as a student. Her relationship with stone intensified and deepened while seeking out the imperfections, crevices and ledges through the contact sport that is rock climbing, scrambling her way up the craggy faces of New York’s Shawangunk mountains.

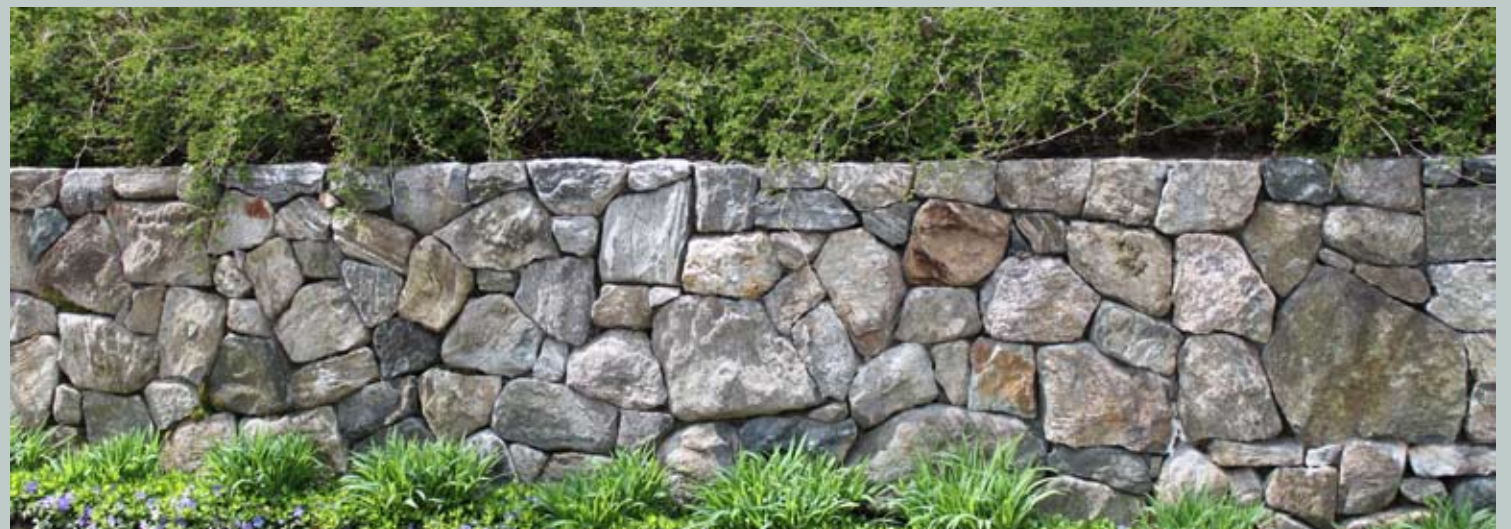
Thoroughly researched and interspersed with many interesting stone-related quotes, Johnsen’s book illustrates the meaning, spiritual significance and symbolism that rocks and stones have been imbued with across many cultures. Her main assertion explores how, if we are prepared to be open to it, stone can be said to possess qualities which could be called ‘spirit.’ With many a beautiful turn of phrase she appeals to her readers to “listen to the wordless instruction of the rock.” The examples she has selected to illustrate the book effectively articulate this conversation between the human and the material.



Those of us who work with stone will readily identify with the concept that stone has an energy of its own. The best stonemasons are inwardly attuned to their material, its nature and its potential. It is difficult to explain to someone who does not work with stone the joy when the communication between maker and material is at its best, the psycho-physiological coherence achieved when deep in the process. That state of active peace and inner clarity is only perceived when you break away from the task and realize you have lost all sense of time. When your body, mind and material have been synchronized in optimal cognitive performance, positive emotions arise. As we know, it can be addictive.

Jan makes a passionate case that the use of stone in the garden should be re-evaluated. She describes it as a chameleon material of the best kind and has laid out the book in a series of snappy sections that look at the variety of ways stone can be utilized—and the emotional enrichment it will bring to one's environment. Exploring its identity as 'the bones of a garden' she covers an expansive range of stone-related topics: different garden styles depending on ground conditions and weather; how landscaping structures such as walls, paths, steps can be included within a space; what different kinds of stone bring to a project in terms of function, size, texture and color—and, not least, how stone elements can be complemented and enhanced with careful and thoughtful planting selection.

There is a pleasing balance between text and photographs providing inspiration to spark one's creative imagination for many stone projects yet to be conceived, planned and constructed. I was particularly impressed by photos of certain projects: the fine boulder wall on page 124, a lively visual dance of stone that sits within the soft surrounding landscaping at Sleepy Cat Farm in Greenwich, Connecticut. I also liked the photo of recycled granite kerbs as an informal set of steps within the gravel garden at Chanticleer Garden, Wayne, Pennsylvania. The Fred Flintstone sofa there and the rock *Stegosaurus* add a whimsical touch and show that stone can be fun.



The Spirit of Stone is both an inspirational and a practical introduction to the world of stone. The book is intended to target those not already bitten by the stone bug, those of the stone tribe with a keen eye for detail may notice that some of the illustrated examples of stone work exhibit a certain 'quirkiness' in their execution. The book might have benefited from a craftsman's eye on some of the photographs (these details matter a lot to us) but that is a minor distraction. Many of the images are excellent and I found myself wishing that they—and the book itself—had been larger. This was obviously a decision made by the publisher and Jan cannot be faulted for it.

Books are intended to bestow knowledge, the best of them inspire further investigation. The chapter on *Sustainable Stone* set me thinking about the current state of the garden in modern western societies. Trawling the internet I came across a 2010 study by the University of Delaware titled *Turf Grass Madness—Reasons to Reduce the Lawn in your Landscape*. This paper outlined the case against the modern obsession for one's own 'little bit of green.' The Lawn became all the rage after WW2 as society transitioned from rural to urban; it became the ultimate symbol of the American Dream. Taking everything into account, the pesticides, fertilizers and maintenance required, it is estimated that the annual cost of keeping these non-contributing environmentally damaging patches is a whopping \$30 billion per year in the US alone! Another frightening fact is the estimation that lawn tools and machinery contribute to 5% of all US air pollution! This non-sustainability should be addressed.

Stone, environmentally friendly, 100% recyclable and aesthetically pleasing (as *The Spirit of Stone* illustrates) has enormous potential.

Stone will never regain its place in the construction industry but in landscaping the use of stone is growing in prominence. There is a massive market out there for the stone tribe to target with their skills and knowledge—and the opportunity, all too rare these days, to practice structural stonework.

As Johnsen's book makes clear, stone can be used in ways only limited by the imagination. Some professionals may find this a book they look at only occasionally but the more enterprising of us may choose to buy a few and hand them out to new or potential clients.

Happy Landscaping!

