

Unlock the cages

Sturdy enough to support roadside embankments yet stylish enough to grace gardens at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, gabions are a versatile form of structural engineering. And, as **Ian Hodgson** describes, they can even be planted up



RHS / JAY GEARING

Old frost-shattered clay pots can be put to good use filling a small gabion

Gabions (from the Italian *gabbione* meaning 'cage') are simple yet ingenious devices that are now available to home gardeners for landscaping and more creative, decorative uses. Gabions are the mesh boxes – usually filled with ballast such as rocks – stacked along roadsides to help stabilise embankments. In the last few years they have made the transition from civil engineering and have been re-scaled for domestic use. This is largely via resourceful garden designers searching for products that blend utilitarian style with credible environmental credentials.

The way gabions work is simple and effective. Inset into a slope, the mesh basket – usually of galvanised metal – is carefully filled with stone, which allows water to drain away and prevents erosion. Their weight and mass makes them stable and resistant to subsidence or attrition, hence their use in riverbanks and by seashores.

Gabions in the garden

In gardens, gabions have more modest but no less dramatic uses. Typically they come in a range of sizes, from 12in (30cm) or 18in (45cm) cubes to 12 x 12 x 24in (30 x 30 x 60cm) and 18 x 18 x 24in (45 x 45 x 60cm) galvanised mesh boxes, that are flat-packed and easily assembled (see panel, right). You can use them to create terraces, protect small slopes, build raised beds, support edges of garden pools or to create low walls. However, seek professional advice if planning to stack them more than three units high. Topped with planks or slabs they make effective garden seats. They can even be used as planters, filled with various drought-tolerant plants as long as soil or compost is encased in a jacket of stone or landscaping fabric.

The character of each gabion is determined by the range of materials and how they fill the basket, either used randomly, or laid to create patterns. Gabions are also good for recycling old masonry such as bricks, tiles, broken concrete or even logs. It is deceptive how much material is needed to fill the bigger gabions, so keep the best material on the outside for show.

Gabions are now an established part of garden design and their versatility is astounding. Why not give them a try? ■

Ian Hodgson is a writer and horticultural consultant

@ To watch a video of the author assembling and planting up two gabions, visit 'June 2011' at www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden

GARDEN USES FOR GABIONS



RHS / JANE SEBIRE

Diversity of uses

This gabion wall (above), complete with water spouts, has been planted with ferns such as *Dryopteris* and *Polystichum*, its planting pockets created between layers of warm-toned sandstone. Gabions filled tightly with slates, bricks and old terracotta pots can be used to form a raised bed.



RHS / NEIL HEPWORTH

Gabions as seating

Stone slabs atop these gabions create both a bold, decorative finish and an effective seating area. The baskets are filled with recycled bricks positioned in a variety of orientations to create a tapestry of tones and textures – a clever way of using unwanted masonry.



RHS / JERRY HARPER

Hyde Hall style

Gabions are used to dramatic effect in Hermione's Garden at RHS Garden Hyde Hall. The large baskets of stone have been carefully constructed, layering narrow, facing stones along the front and infilling the back with rougher, more random stone. For projects on this scale, seek advice from a civil engineer and/or architect.

BUILDING A PLANTED GABION

Gabion kits are easy to construct. In addition to their use for general landscaping, they can be made into miniature gardens using a wide variety of more drought-tolerant plants such as alpines, grasses, ferns and hardy succulents.



PHOTOGRAPHY: RHS / TIM SANDALL



1 Unpack the six mesh panels and in turn weave each of the spiral binders between the edges of five of the panels, locking them together to create the basket. As some metal surfaces are rough, it can be beneficial to wear protective gloves while doing this. To prevent binders slipping out, crimp the end of the wire to the mesh panel with pliers.

2 Place the gabion in its intended final position. Cover the base with landscaping fabric or stone and start to build up the side walls, packing stones in well to prevent compost being washed out. Fill the centre with loam-based compost, such as John Innes No.1, to support the stones. Leave a few holes to create planting pockets, and plant up as you proceed.



3 Choose young plants in small pots to enable the rootballs to be threaded through the mesh, ensuring roots are embedded in the compost inside. Firm compost around the rootball and continue to build up the basket. Plant the upper surface and finish with decorative chippings as required. Water thoroughly, especially in dry weather.

