

Construct a Stone Wall

Nothing is more basic than building with rocks, and there are simple stone walls still standing after thousands of years. If you want to divide your lawn from your garden, mark the border of your property, or slow the advance of an invading hoard, building a stone wall by hand is a practical and even beautiful solution.



Step 1 – Pick and Mark the Location

Look at the lay of the land. Is it even enough to support your wall? Of course, a vertical wall can be built across a slope, but it's much harder. Look also for tree roots that may push the structure around.

Drive a stake into the ground at one end and a second stake at the other. Tie a string tight and level from stake to stake to get your line.

Step 2 – Dig the Foundation

Up to 3 feet high, the width of the base should equal the height, so for simplicity's sake, we'll build a 3 foot wall. So, make your trench 3 feet across and 8 inches deep, and as long as the wall will be. If you live in an area where the freeze thaw cycle is a factor, then dig down past the frost line.

Step 3 – Sort Your Stones

Since you're using natural rock, each one will be different from the others, and some are better suited for some purposes than others. Select the largest and most irregular stones to be your base. A big, heavy foundation will make the wall strong, and you can hide the oddities because much of the base will be underground. The next largest stones should be set aside for your "capstones." They should be as flat on the top and bottom as possible, and large enough to cover the width of the finished wall. Every 6 feet of every course you need a "through stone," which like a capstone needs to cover the width. The rest of the stones are your basic building blocks.

Step 4 – Lay the Bed

Use a crowbar and wheelbarrow to move the base layer stones into the trench. Make sure they're well bedded down and there's no wobble to them. You didn't lay sand or gravel and level the whole trench, because the weight of these stones will cause them to settle into the earth a bit, but you want to make them as even and level as you can to be a good host to the courses above them.

Step 5 – Lay the First Course

With the basic building stones, start at one end and set the stones on the base. This is like building a puzzle. Find the best angle for each stone to fit snugly, filling gaps with smaller stones. If you need to, use a hammer and chisel to chip off odd pieces of a rock that prevent it from setting in place. As you work your way down the course, set a through stone across the width of the wall every 6 feet. This will help keep everything where it should be.

Step 6 – Lay the Next Courses

The next courses go down just like the first. And just like a brick wall, make sure the joints between stones are staggered away from the joints of the course below. You don't want to create any direct channel for water to flow straight into the wall or it'll never last 1000 years. Stagger the through stones too. Depending on the size of your stones, you may be laying 4, 5, or 6 courses.

Step 7 – Set the Capstones

With the last course in place, finish off the wall with the capstones. These jam the lower courses in place and hold everything together. You can cheat a bit and use mortar here, for the sake of a belt and suspenders. Mix up the mortar and spread it on top of the last course in such a way that it won't squish out when you put the capstone on top. You don't want the mortar to show. If it does, you can wipe it away before it dries. You could also leave out the mortar all together, and let gravity be the only thing holding your wall in place.

Now you have your wall. It was heavy, dirty work, but there's a monument your ancestors can admire for generations to come.

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