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Hello, shellow brick road

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Two barrowloads made this shell footpath prettier than the slippery cardboard that's underneath, and they provide a surefooted cobblestone feeling along with slow-release calcium enrichment. (Photo by Alex Féthière)

If you've used cardboard for weed suppression, you know paths are a challenging place for it. They become perilously slippery in the dusty summer and sopping winter.

The treacherous surface can keep deer off paths, and has even deterred them from my tomato plants. But it's not worth the close calls with the ground, especially when you have to caution visitors.

Permaculture and rural frugality dictate that we should put existing resources to multiple uses, particularly when they don't have to travel far. Since I arrived on Harstine Island, I've been brainstorming uses for our oyster (and other bivalve) shells.

After all, we have mountains of them. I asked a friend who works in shellfishing and he thinks it's an issue of permitting: a different permit is required to dispose of shells than the one granted to harvest oysters. (If I'm mistaken, please let me know.)

I'm happy to help! Just as I've mucked out barns for manure, I'll clear beaches of those messy oyster shells. Funny how nothing in "nature" is litter.

A friend and I took two double-wheel barrows down to the shore at low tide and filled them with shells. We gathered just enough for an experiment: can shells be placed edge-down to provide a cobblestone-like surface on cardboard paths?

Such a surface would have several benefits. Traction would be near perfect in all seasons. Slugs would not enjoy crossing paths covered with sharp and salty shells. Calcium carbonate, the primary component of bivalve shells, would slowly release into the soil as the shells are dissolved by our slightly acidic rain and ground up by foot, barrow and cart traffic.

Some claim the extra calcium helps prevent blossom-end rot in fruit trees, and of course chickens enjoy flaking off oyster shell grit for healthy, strong eggshells.

This slow-release calcium will slowly reduce soil acidity and provide a sorely needed nutrient. I'm unconcerned about the salt because our rains wash so much of it away — and the remaining micronutrients in trace seawater, like selenium, are a welcome soil resource.

It was fun and relaxing to spread and place the shells. I adopted a wide stance and bent at the waist over a pile dumped from the wheelbarrow. When stepped on, they readily bit through the cardboard and pinned it into the clay. Some shattered, but so much the better. They will pulverize down into mortar and are easily replaced with heartier shells.

Slippery spots on my clay soil also got shell implants. Now when I have to step there in winter I don't slide 6 to 8 inches.

It was work, but it was light and it will last. Probably at least as long as woodchips, the alternative that I have also widely deployed.

I'd rather fill my truck from piles of oyster shells than drag a wheelbarrow 145 feet up from sea level, but the barrow was a great workout. I'm always looking for workouts in late winter to get me back in shape for spring.

SLUGGING IT OUT

Were you reading last week and wondering who won the Hamm's beer/Mike's Hard Lemonade bout? Hamm's took it in the first round! I've read that sourdough starter in traps can lure slugs, and Hamm's does smell more like sourdough than Mike's or Coors Light. This week, Mike's caught more flies and bored the slugs so much they ate all the Sluggo in the bunker and left.

I welcome suggestions for next contenders. I'll be visiting WinCo soon, and the nursery for more traps. Get out there. Hit the slugs hard while they're little and crowds of them fit in traps.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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