HOMEOWNER REPAIR GUIDE

REPAIRING EXTERIOR BRICK STEPS

Sometime today, you will probably walk up or down the steps outside your house without even noticing them. They're like the Maytag repairman—lonely. Seldom do we pay them any attention... until a loose brick falls into the cavity under your porch, or one of those beautiful sandstone treads breaks. If you could view your house through the eyes of a stranger, however, you'd see that steps in bad repair can ruin the first impression given by your home, and take away from its attractiveness.

STYLES AND MATERIALS

There are as many different types of steps as flavors of ice cream. One style is not necessarily better than another. The style of your steps should relate to the type and style of your house.

> **CHANGING THE STYLE?**
>
> Note that replacement of existing steps with a different style or material may require approval by your Building Department; check with them about the appropriate procedures.

MATERIAL	PROS AND CONS
Masonry (brick or stone)	The advantage to masonry steps is that the materials don't deteriorate; however, the mortar holding the bricks together can fall apart in time, leaving them without normal support.
Wood	Wooden steps, on the other hand, are subject to rot.

So, there is no perfect material from which to make steps. The best approach is to learn to recognize the problems common to each type, so you can correct them before you have to replace the entire steps.

WHY MASONRY STEPS FAIL

Problems with masonry steps start with the foundation. When a home is built, its foundation is dug deep into the ground. Unfortunately, steps are usually built on a much less substantial foundation. As the house settles over the years, the steps settle at a different rate. This situation usually produces a diagonal crack in the brickwork between the house and the steps. Unless you want to remove the steps, replace their foundation with a stronger one, and then rebuild the steps, there is little you can do except tuckpoint the crack when needed—digging out old mortar and replacing it with new. Once the mortar deteriorates, then fairly quickly the bricks will loosen and fall out. Before you know it, your stone treads will crack and break, and they'll need much more substantial work to get them back into good shape.

CHECK YOUR STEPS ONCE A YEAR

A quick going-over once a year will help keep masonry steps in good repair. You may wish to tuckpoint in the fall, since the water and ice that get in between the brick joints in the winter do the most damage. If you go into the winter with the brickwork nice and solid, then chances are you'll emerge in the spring in good shape.

BROKEN TREADS AND LANDINGS

Once the treads have broken, however, it becomes much more difficult to salvage the steps. Many steps have brick risers supported by the tread beneath them—so when a tread cracks, that support is lost, and the bricks start to shift out of alignment. In a few situations, you may be able to repair the broken areas without having to rebuild the entire unit.

PROBLEM	REPAIR
Broken corner, supported by the riser	One common problem involves a sandstone tread or landing where a corner has broken off—often at the place where the handrail was anchored. If the broken portion is all in one piece, and if the piece can be supported by the riser underneath, then you can sometimes adhere the broken corner with vinyl patching cement or a two-part epoxy. (You won't be able to reattach the rail at that same spot; you'll need to readjust the railing to a new position.)
Broken corner, not supported	If the broken corner can't be supported by the riser, however, you won't be able to reattach it permanently, and will need to have the entire tread or landing replaced.
Cracked or collapsing landing	If the landing has cracked and started to collapse, but the rest of the unit is solid, you may be able to have a replacement landing cast in place from concrete. A form will have to be built to support the weight of the wet mix until it cures and hardens. Check with your city's Building Department before undertaking this repair, to make sure their requirements will be met.

WHEN STEPS MUST BE REBUILT

Masonry steps that are beyond preventive maintenance—with broken treads and/or many missing bricks—may need to be rebuilt. This is a permit job, and usually must be done by a professional. A new foundation will generally be required.

Home Repair Resource center

Home Repair Resource Center empowers homeowners to maintain their homes for sustainable and diverse communities.

WWW.HRRC-CH.ORG **+1.216.381.6100** **2520 Noble Road, Cleveland Heights, OH 44121**

© 2026, Home Repair Resource Center