



EXPRESS YOURSELF

Rural Entrances Put Pride and Purpose on Display

Stone walls and wildlife-themed metalwork symbolize pride of ownership at this Northwest Texas ranch, which has a long history of hunting and cattle ranching.

You could say Texans like to make a dramatic entrance. From the High Plains to the Piney Woods and the Red River to the Rio Grande, one thing we have in common is the desire to make a statement with our gates and entries.

In the Texas Hill Country, generations have put craftsmanship on display with decorative metal gates flanked by stone piers and walls. In the Panhandle and West Texas, arches rule the day, from basic posts and crossbars to arcs bearing the family or ranch name. In South Texas, entrances range from simple to ornate and often are landscaped with rugged native plants. And East Texas tastes are as varied as the terrain, where brick columns with board fencing are popular in horse country and pipe fencing is common on cattle ranches and timberland.

“My granddad always used to say, ‘The bigger the gate, the smaller the ranch.’ Nowadays that’s not necessarily the case,” says Sarah Cortese, Capital Farm Credit director of communications, who is based in Lubbock. “Simplicity and utility were the accepted norms then. They still are, but now entrances are more often used as a form of self-expression.”

Often what determines the style of an entrance is the way the property is used. Curb appeal frequently signals landowners’ pride in their homesteads and hunting properties, while at full-time

farming and ranching operations, what matters most are functional entrances that can stand up to heavy use and equipment.

Many properties incorporate both.

“You have your main entrance for a home and office, and larger operations have separate entrances depending on the business carried out on that portion,” Cortese says. “A horse-breeding operation or an area where livestock are worked or shipped will be separated out almost like a service entrance.”

FORM AND FUNCTION

Increasingly, owners display how they use their property like a badge of honor. Gates and arches commonly feature metal silhouettes of cattle or brands on ranches, corn or tractors on farms, and deer or game birds on recreational property.

“The advent of the plasma cutter has made a huge difference in entrances. If you can dream it, they can cut it,” says Kenneth Hooper, senior vice president and officer in charge at Panhandle-Plains Land Bank’s Plainview branch office. “Whether it’s Rancher Jones or Dr. Jones, the owners put their signature on a piece of land in some fashion to communicate with their workers and peers.”

Technology has also led a shift to custom wood or metal gates that act as a billboard for the property.



Native landscaping and rugged pipe fencing are common sights on property used for ranching or recreation in South Texas.

“Automatic gate openers have become very common,” says Jolene Curtis, vice president of business development for Texas Farm Credit. Swinging or sliding gate openers can be hard-wired or solar-powered, can be operated by remote control or keypad, and can be customized with many security features.

“Some new technology lets owners monitor who’s accessing the gates and when by using different access codes,” say Curtis, who is based in Brenham. “Property with oil and gas leases will have multiple people coming in and out, for example. We also see some systems that take pictures of the people passing through, particularly in South Texas.”

As important as security is, there’s also a lot to be said for convenience.

“In plenty of places, you still walk out and open the gate,” Cortese says with a laugh. “If someone invites you to ride shotgun, it isn’t as much of a treat because the front passenger has to get out and open the gate. Spouses, kids and guests alike have been in that position.”

GETTING STARTED

Frequently the entrance is one of the first improvements new owners take on, whether they are just changing the name on the gate or building a new home with matching stonework at the driveway.

With so many possible options, the cost varies greatly. Prices range from about \$3,000 for a utility gate with an automatic opener to \$75,000 or more for an entrance with custom masonry and metalwork. It’s not unusual to spend \$20,000, loan officers say.

To cover the expense, owners can finance an entrance several ways — with the land purchase, with a package of land improvements such as fencing and land clearing, or with an operating line of credit for an agricultural operation.

“Being able to spread the cost over a term is an advantage,” Hooper explains. “You can have manageable debt rather than burning all of your liquidity making capital improvements. You may need some of your cash to buy calves or equipment later.”

When you’re ready to build, make sure your entrance is designed with safety and practicality in mind. Think about how much room you will need to maneuver, the speed of traffic on the adjoining road, and where to locate a driveway for the best visibility, braking and turning. Most driveways will require a permit and inspection.

“From a very pragmatic standpoint, engaging a transportation agency would be important, and the sooner the better,” says Bill Eisele, a



Decorative silhouettes transform a simple pipe entrance into a work of art at a family ranch in the Hill Country.

senior research engineer with the Texas A&M Transportation Institute. “They work with landowners frequently, and are very knowledgeable about driveway placement and design.”

To make sure you end up with a safe, functional and attractive entrance:

- Look for a local contractor who has the experience and large equipment necessary for rural property improvements
- Get bids and warranties in writing, and make sure they are in line for your area
- Check references

“There can be a big price discrepancy between builders,” Curtis says. “My main recommendation is to get referrals, interview the contractors’ other clients and go look at some of the work they’ve done.”

With financing and a reputable contractor lined up, all you’ll need to make your dramatic entrance is imagination.

10 Tips for Rural Driveways

1. Contact the appropriate state, county or municipal agency about driveway design, placement and permits. The Texas Department of Transportation oversees driveways on FM, RM and RR roads, and state, U.S. and interstate highways.
2. Locate driveways away from curves and hills, and avoid blocking visibility with masonry, fencing, vegetation and mailboxes.
3. Consider installing separate entrances for a residence, farming or ranching operation, oil and gas activity, or other functions on your property.
4. Make sure an entrance is wide and tall enough for the vehicles and equipment that will use it.
5. Set the gate far enough from the road to accommodate a truck and trailer.
6. Consider adding a turn bay where driveway users can slow down without blocking traffic.
7. Gate openers, intercoms, driveway sensors and cameras offer extra security and convenience.
8. Use reflectors or lighting to improve visibility at night and during bad weather.
9. If the property has game fencing, match it with a high gate.
10. Ensure good drainage with proper driveway placement, slope and culverts.

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