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Choosing Mortar

Q I'm going to build a brick-and-mortar planter this summer. Which mortar do I use? I've seen two types: Type S Mason Mix and Type N Mortar Mix.

That's a good question. Both cost about the same—around \$5 for an 80-pound bag—and either would work, but Type N is preferred. "It's not unusual for homeowners to get Type S and Type N mortars confused," Quikrete's vice president of marketing, Frank Owens, says. He has spent his entire career in the concrete industry so he should know. Owens explains that there is a significant difference between the two materials. The "N" in Type N stands for normal strength. It should only be used for nonstructural applications like building a garden wall or making a planter. Conversely the "S" in Type S stands for structural. Use this mortar when a structure is load bearing or supports weight, such as a foundation wall. According to the Portland Cement Association (PCA), Type N has a compressive strength of 750 psi while Type S is much stronger with a compressive strength of 1800 psi. You would think stronger is better, right? Not necessarily, the PCA says. Type N is generally better for nonstructural situations because it's more likely to deform slightly under load rather than crack. Before you begin this work, pick up a copy of *Building With Masonry: Brick, Block & Concrete*. Written by longtime mason Dick Kreh, it's a classic in the realm of how-to literature.