

It's time for our annual publication of the "Great Stepping Stone Recipe." I can't take credit for this wonderful idea. Master Gardener Donna Paulson taught me how to make stepping stones. She says, "But they've taken on a life all their own." I can't imagine what she means. Do you think it's because we had over 100 people at Raab Park this year making them?

To make your own stones you'll need ready mix concrete. A \$1.79 bag makes around five to seven stones. You can also buy and add pigment to make colored concrete. Find plastic sheeting or a tarp. In addition you'll need a wheelbarrow, a hoe, and water.

Now you need a mold. Disposable cake pans and pizza boxes work quite well. You'll peel them off the stones later. Or make 14 to 18-inch square molds out of plywood. Have your favorite local lumberyard cut a square of plywood for the bottom and cut four strips to make a one to two-inch tall frame around the square. Using screws, attach the sides to the bottom and to each other so you can later release the mold from the concrete. Try making rings using five-gallon paint and plaster buckets. Saw 1-1/4-inch tall circular rings slicing through each ring once and hold it back together with duct tape. You'll pop the mold off when the concrete sets up. Place chicken wire or mesh for reinforcement in the pizza box and large square molds before you pour in the concrete. If you mix your concrete a bit thick you won't even need molds. Maybe you'll create a free-form stone in the shape of a fish, heart, oval, hexagon, or leaf for your garden.

Next gather items to decorate your stones. Use ferns, leaves (rhododendron, maple, hosta, cedar sprigs), glass beads (the kind used in vases), beach glass, polished or natural rocks, pieces of broken crockery, seashells, bits of stained glass or mirror, beads, pennies, buttons, anything you can find to permanently reside on a stepping stone. One of my friends used old horseshoes. There is no limit to your ideas.

Once you've gathered your materials start creating. I recommend making the stones with a buddy. Ready-mix bags are heavy so it helps to have two people hefting them and mixing up the concrete. Also it's much more fun. We recently had six of us at my house and made them in half of our garage. Spread a tarp (or plastic bag) out on a flat surface. Always wear gloves to protect your hands from concrete burn. Keep a bucket of water close by for washing concrete off hands. Open one bag of concrete and dump it in a wheelbarrow. Add water a little at a time (it doesn't take very much). Mix and stir with a garden hoe. The concrete will look like thick oatmeal. Use a bucket or large coffee can to dip out the concrete and pour it in the molds. Use a board or trowel to smooth and level the mixture in the mold.

It's time to decorate away. You'll be working on top of the surface. When using vegetation make sure it sinks partially into the concrete to get a good impression. (When the stone is dry you'll peel the vegetation off.) To imbed an item in the concrete you sometimes need to gently rock it a bit or tap it lightly several times. If it sinks, scoop it out, smooth the concrete and start again. As you work you might notice a light film of cement on items; this will wash or rub off when the stones have set up. It takes about ten minutes for the concrete to start setting up so you'll want to work fast but don't panic either. We've even put our bare feet into the stones. You can decorate your imprinted toes with bright glass beads to resemble toenails. Try the same thing with your hand. Just make sure to wash your foot and hand quickly to keep the concrete from drying out your skin.

When your stones are done be sure to immediately wash off all your tools and the wheelbarrow. It will take a few days for the stepping stones to completely set up. It's best to keep them in a shaded place. You can pop the molds off in about two days. If your stone(s) crack you can still place them in your garden. Cracked stones make nice garden art too. Out of hundreds though we've only had two crack, so don't worry too much.

You can use the same process to create birdbaths. Scoop out a place in the soil in your garden. We've even used piles of mulch or beauty bark. Pour and pat the cement into a desired shape. Try lining the depression first with cedar twigs or crinkly leaves to make texture on the bottom of the birdbath. Decorate the inside the same way you did the stepping stones. Remember there are no rights or wrongs in garden art. Don't be afraid to be creative.

*You can email comments to Peg Tillery at [gardenmentor@yahoo.com](mailto:gardenmentor@yahoo.com) or in care of this newspaper.*