

Do you ever get overwhelmed about your own garden after touring Bainbridge in Bloom, the Northwest Flower and Garden Show or other garden tours? It's time for a small pep talk. I spoke to Elizabeth Olsen about friends who were discouraged about their own gardens. Elizabeth gave me wonderful words to share, "You have to think of it as a visit to Disneyland." We need to remember that many of us will never have such awesome and splendiferous gardens, but we can all certainly enjoy looking at those that others have lovingly tended and made their life's work.

Garden tours and shows are a delightful way for us to see plants at their best. Some of us get all dressed up in fancy clothes for a wedding or party, but we don't look like that all the time. Gardens we see at yearly events are all dressed up. Don't fool yourselves – they get scruffy sometimes too, just like people. Always cherish yourselves and your gardens.

I thought this week you'd like to read how to make hyper tufa garden art. My gardening buddies Sandra Buitron, Donna Paulson, Denise Johnson, Diane Seabury and I decided to play with hyper tufa last week. I made a fish, a cat, a round moon face studded with glass beads and a huge round pot. Denise made a pedestal with a birdbath to sit on top. Everyone else made hyper tufa pots and tubs.

Hyper tufa was developed by the English who used old moss covered water troughs as containers for alpine plantings. Tufa or calcium carbonate is a mineral/rock that is naturally full of holes and often contains organic matter like leaves, twigs and moss. As gardeners ran out of these natural rock troughs they developed human-made hyper tufa containers made from a mixture of Portland cement, sand and peat moss (or perlite or coconut husk fiber). Two great web sites giving recipes and showing photos of hyper tufa garden art are: viagrafix.net/pingle/ip98/mar98_3/pg14 and efildoog-nz.com/hypertufa. Master gardener Virginia Jones taught me how to make them.

To make pots, birdbaths, or critters you'll need gloves, a shovel, hoe, wheelbarrow, Portland cement, perlite (or coconut husk fiber, or peat moss) and fine sand. You'll use a ratio of 1:1:2 with 2 being the perlite (or coconut husk fiber or peat moss). For example, using a gallon bucket and a wheelbarrow dump in one bucket of cement, one of sand and two buckets of perlite. When we made our hyper tufa items we used two wheelbarrows and mixed up a peat moss mixture in one and a perlite mixture in the other. We decided the perlite mixture was preferable. You can decide for yourself.

Put on gloves and keep them on for the rest of the project. Be sure you really mix the dry ingredients well before adding the water. Use the shovel and hoe to mix. Hands are great too. Mix for about 15 minutes. Think of it as sifting ingredients together to make cookie dough. Add water a bit at a time. Mix with hoe and shovel again and finish up with your hands. The mixture will resemble stiff cookie dough. Test it by squeezing a handful. If it sticks together with no water running out it's ready to begin.

Use boxes, bowls, garbage can lids (for birdbaths), old baskets or any container you have for your mold. Put plastic in the mold. You'll be keeping all portions of the hyper tufa at least 1-1/2 inches thick. Dump a handful of the hyper tufa mix in the bottom and press it firmly. To make the sides you'll work your way up from the bottom layering the sides up as you go. Press and press to be sure the hyper-tufa is all molded together. Use a dowel to make several holes in the bottom of the container for drainage. Be sure the hole goes all the way through. If you want to mold a critter, form him/her on a piece of plastic. Use the same technique as you did with the containers.

When your items are finished to your satisfaction wrap them up in plastic and place them in a cool, shady place to cure for two weeks. Don't disturb your hyper tufa, it takes two weeks for it to properly set up and cure. After two weeks unwrap your items and wash them off with clear water for one more week. Containers need to be hosed off inside and out to wash out the chemicals in cement that would burn tender plant roots or leaves.

You can coat your hyper tufa with moss. Find a clump of moss, remove the soil and put the moss in a blender with one cup of buttermilk (or 1 T. vinegar or lemon juice added to 1 cup of milk). Mix well and apply to the outside of your hyper tufa. Or try one can of beer and two sugar cubes mixed well and spread over the hyper tufa. Sugar helps the spores multiply and beer helps the moss cling to the pot. Then plant away and enjoy the art you've created.

You can email comments to Peg Tillery at gardenmentor@yahoo.com or in care of this newspaper.