

It's time for the famous stepping stones recipe. This is a great project to do with friends. Before starting assemble the following items: tarp or piece of plastic; wheelbarrow, long handled garden hoe, bag of Ready-mix, Quickcrete or Portland cement; water; chicken wire for large stones; items to decorate the stepping stones; and your imagination. You'll also need something to mold the stepping stones in – a pizza box, disposable pie or cake pan, or free form the stepping stones.

The stones will be about one to one and a half inches thick when completed. Concrete is caustic so be sure to wear gardening or plastic gloves; or else have a bucket of water, soap and paper towels close by so you can wash your hands quickly and/or often.

You can also buy pigment to add to the cement mixture. It's available at most stores selling cement products. You can also use Portland cement for a smooth surface without any aggregate (small pebbles). Quickcrete is a bit shinier than Ready-mix when it dries.

Items to imbed in the stepping stones can be just about anything. Try colorful pebbles, marbles, glass beads, shells, cut glass, bits of mirror, pieces of tile, the list is endless. Some people imbed pennies or other coins. A horsewoman friend of mine put some of her horses' old shoes in the stones.

You can also make imprints in your stepping stones. Ferns, hosta leaves, cedar sprigs, hands and feet are good choices. The plant matter will stick to the cement but is fairly easy to remove after the stones dry. Usually the plant parts peel off but sometimes you'll have to let them biodegrade with time or brush them away with a scrubbing brush. Remember to wash your hands and feet quickly.

Now you can finally begin! Spread a sheet of plastic or a tarp on a level surface. You can use a lawn or the floor of a garage (if your partner will allow it), a piece of plywood or a sandy area in your garden. It's best to make the stones in the shade or on a cloudy day.

Put your molds on the plastic or other smooth surface where you'll begin creating. If someone you know has a saw to cut plastic you can make one to one and a half inch tall rings using five gallon plastic buckets. Cut the ring once all the way through and then tape it together with duct tape. The rings pop off and you can use them again and again. If you're using huge square pizza boxes, place a piece of chicken wire in the box and then pour the cement on top of it. The wire reinforces the concrete so it won't crack.

Empty your chosen cement mixture into a wheelbarrow. You can sprinkle in some pigment at this time. A little goes a long way. Colors I've seen are green, putty and terra cotta. Add a little water at a time. The directions on the bag usually say how much, but it's not rocket science. You'll start mixing the cement and water together with a hoe. You'll want the consistency of oatmeal.

You can either assemble your decorative bits in the mold before pouring the cement. For more instant gratification, decorate your stepping stones after pouring in the cement. If you make a mistake, scoop out your embellishments, wash them off and start again. Some items have to be rocked back and forth a little to get them imbedded in the cement. If you imprint your hand or feet try putting something shiny (like glass beads) where your nails would be. You can also write and draw on the cement using a nail or pointed item. Or make plain stones without decorations and spray the concrete with pop to bring up the aggregate texture. Try free forming hearts, stars, triangles or other shapes.

Now all you'll have to do is wait for the stones to set up. It usually takes a day. Pop them out of their molds and step away.

Send comments or questions to Peg at gardenmentor@yahoo.com or in care of this newspaper.