

Cement leaves have been elevated to a state of fine art by Little and Lewis of Bainbridge Island. These garden artists generously shared their secret recipe with Martha Stewart and in turn freely share it with all of us. No one can ever equal Little and Lewis' expertise and incredible creations, but we can dabble in cement leaf making and have fun in the process. Ingredients are found locally wherever cement products are sold. You might only find the materials in the jumbo size version though so try inviting some friends over for a leaf making party.

Luckily there will be plenty of leaves around through mid October. Try leaves from a hosta, sunflower, rhubarb, pumpkin, squash, Empress tree, Gunnera or any plant with pronounced veining. You'll also need fine sand, Portland cement (not ready or premix), and bonding agent. It's also fun to add pigment in either green, putty or terra cotta. Fred Hill, locally, is a source for bonding agent and pigment. Pigment usually comes in powdered form and bonding agent is sold in gallon containers.

Sand is needed to mix in with the cement and also to form under the leaves. Before mixing up the cement mixture, pile up a mound of sand. Moisten the sand and pat it smooth so it won't collapse under the weight of the cement you'll be molding on top of the leaf. Cover up the firm sand mound with plastic wrap and spread a leaf over the plastic wrap making sure the plastic wrap extends out around the leaf edges.

This is the part I at first had trouble grasping. What you want is for the veins of the leaf to be facing up at you while you're looking down at the leaf on top of the sand mound. (This is probably sounding as clear as muddy sand now isn't it?) Hang in there you'll get it. And, if not, when you discover your mistake, you can always make another cement leaf.

Use a wheelbarrow for mixing. Some recipes say mix in a bucket. Don't. It's much easier to mix in a wheelbarrow. Garden hoes and short flat spades work well for stirring the mixture, so do gloved hands. In the wheelbarrow pour in two to three parts sand for each part of cement. (Try using a bucket to measure and for every bucket of cement mix in two buckets of sand.)

Use a second bucket to mix water and bonding agent. About one cup bonding agent for every two gallons of water. To create a colored cement mixture add pigment. Use about one-fourth to one cup of pigment for every 90 pounds of cement. Sand comes in 60-pound bags at about \$3.50 and the Portland cement in 90-pound bags at about \$6.50.

Add a little bit of water/bonding agent to the cement/sand mixture and continue adding and mixing thoroughly until the mixture reaches the consistency of spreadable cream cheese or thick peanut butter. Wear gloves to protect your hands. Most people take their gloves off at some point because this process is like playing with mud pies or molding with clay. Have some water and soap handy and remember to slather your hands with handcream when your project is finished. That way your hands won't get too dried out.

Spread and smooth the cement mixture on top of the leaf following the contours. Leave a small edge of real leaf exposed. The cement thickness should be about one-half inch thick in the center thinning to one-fourth inch on the edges. You can brush your cement leaf smooth with a damp two-inch paintbrush. Lightly cover your newly-created cement leaf with plastic wrap. Leave in a cool shady spot. The cement will begin setting up and curing overnight.

It usually takes two days for the cement leaf to dry completely. Turn it over and peel off the leaf you used as a mold. Some leaves are difficult to remove, but they biodegrade soon. If you'd like to stain or burnish your leaf mix up one part exterior latex paint with two parts water. Spread the paint over the leaf and wipe off with a soft cloth or old tee shirt. When dry display the leaf in your garden. Cement leaves make ideal birdbaths. Let your imagination go wild with your work of art.

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