

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 6-05-02) , ©2005

Some of my gardening friends have been asking me to repeat the instructions for cement stepping stones. The cooler cloudy days would be perfect for this activity.

Prices vary depending on whether you use Quickrete, Ready-mix or Portland cement. Aggregates Quickrete and Ready-mix sell for under two dollars and can give a rough texture. Portland cement runs around six dollars and gives a smooth finish. Each bag makes about five stepping stones depending on the size. You can also purchase cement pigment to mix in for colored stones.

Other materials needed are: gloves to protect your hands, water, a wheelbarrow, square edged hoe, molds to shape the stepping stones and items to imbed in the cement. Friends and kids come in handy too. It's always more fun to do this as a group activity.

Stepping stones can be free-formed or shaped in molds. You can also use disposable cake or pie pans and even empty pizza boxes. If your stepping stone is more than twelve inches across use chicken wire in the bottom of the mold to act as reinforcement so the stone won't split when stepped on. Stones should be one to two inches thick.

Some of our local garden centers and nurseries have stepping stone parties where you can get a mold, materials and make a stepping stone. Then you get to keep the mold and take your stone home. The stones usually run about twelve to twenty dollars.

Donna Paulson who taught me how to make stepping stones has a most creative husband (named Jack Paulson). Jack made stepping stone molds out of plastic pipe. The pipe was cut to make rings. Each ring was about two inches tall and one slice cut the tube open. Duct tape keeps the hoops together but allows for stone removal. Five gallon buckets sliced into rings work too. Jack also made wooden square frames using plywood and one-by-ones for the frame around the plywood. The frame was held together with screws and popped apart.

Nearly anything can be imbedded in the cement mixture. Try beach glass, shells, bits of jewelry, colored or polished rocks, oval or circular glass beads or any items you find at local craft stores. Don't forget bits of broken mirror, tile and stained glass. Many tile and glass stores sell it by the pound. Sylvia Smith and her crew at Poulsbo Market Thriftway garden department will have recycled glass of all shapes and sizes in about two weeks.

Find a level, flat space to work. Lay out plastic sheets, garbage bags or tarps to protect the area where you'll make the stones. Place the molds on the work area. Use a wheelbarrow and dump one bag of cement in. Add water about a quart at a time and mix with a hoe until it is fully stirred and resembles lumpy oatmeal. Use a bucket or can to scoop out enough to fill your molds. You can even free-form a stepping stone. Try shapes such as: hearts, diamonds, or ovals. Use a straight stick, piece of cardboard or gardening spade (or even your gloved hands) to smooth and level the mold.

Now you can decorate away. Some people like to put their decorations in before pouring in the cement mixture. I've always enjoyed looking at my work in progress. If you make a mistake or if your items sink into the cement, put your fingers in and pull the item out and start again. It takes a while for the cement to start to harden so don't panic you'll have enough time. Sometimes you'll have to gently tap on items to get them to adhere to the cement mixture and sink in a bit.

Try imbedding sprigs of cedar, large hosta leaves, ferns or rhody leaves in the stones. The plant parts pull off the finished stone and/or biodegrade. Push a small pie pan into your stone to make an indentation for water for the birds. (Remove the pie pan after the cement starts to harden.) You could make a larger birdbath by digging out a bowl shape in your garden and molding the cement mixture in the indentation. Garbage can lids lined with plastic wrap make good birdbath molds too. Don't forget to imbed some shiny stones or decorations in the birdbath you've made.

I hope you'll try your luck at this no-fail garden art. Let your imagination be your guide.

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