

# Simulated stone planters give gardens old-world charm

Those who like the look of old stone planters and troughs in classic English gardens can make delightful facsimiles using "hypertufa," a simulated-stone material that can be mixed at home.

Ingredients vary, but are easily found and can be made into garden containers, bird-baths and landscape accents that look like stone, but are much lighter and inexpensive.

Often, a mixture of Portland cement, coconut fiber and perlite is used, according to Linda McMahan, staff chairman and consumer horticulturist for the Yamhill County office of Oregon State University Extension Service.

"The material itself is easy to work with, sort of like cookie dough," McMahan said. "It is also amazingly inexpensive, and the possibilities for shapes, sizes and colors almost endless. It's like making mud pies for adults. It's fun, low-key, great for patio parties; messy ones in jeans that is."

Working with hypertufa is easy for the beginner, McMahan said. "If you make

a mistake, so what? Just start over. It's about as expensive as spilt milk."

Hypertufa containers work well for rock gardens, succulents, alpine plants and other "fussy" little plants, McMahan said. "I have troughs all over my garden -- on the front stoop, on the back patio, next to the small pond, in the middle of a flower bed. You can stack them and raise plants to various levels."

European gardeners have used stone troughs and other obsolete cement for planters for centuries, McMahan said. The stone containers made such a splendid addition to ornamental gardens, they soon became a "must have" in the European countryside.

After a time, the stone cast-offs became rare, so folks turned to tufa rock, a soft volcanic porous rock easily hollowed and carved. By the 1930s and '40s, tufa rocks became less available and expensive. Creative gardeners decided to make their own "tufa," calling it hypertufa.

"As you have guessed,

there are many recipes, all with pluses and minuses," McMahan said. "When I mix, I add water just until it sticks together when squeezed and begins to glisten."

Hypertufa planters made with sand can easily stand up for 20 years, she said. "The light-weight ones made with perlite aren't quite as durable, but can last about 10 years if they are not abused. Plant roots can make their way into crevices and quicken the breakdown process."

A caution: hypertufa objects can break with rough use. "Don't drop one," warned McMahan. "Not only will it break; it might break your foot."

Hypertufa recipe:  
Ingredients: (relative volumes are given).

- 3 parts coir (coconut fiber)
- 2 parts Portland Cement type I-II
- 3 parts perlite

You can find the coconut fiber and perlite at garden centers, and Portland Cement at construction or lumber stores. Portland Cement

comes only in 94-pound sacks; will not keep; and becomes hard quickly. Plan to make a lot of hypertufa pots, or have a party.

Measure the ingredients by volume with a bucket. Put on gloves and mix by hand in a cement tray (plastic and inexpensive), wheelbarrow or other large container. Add water gradually and mix with ingredients until it is stiff and holds together, about like cookie dough or cottage cheese.

Mold the wet hypertufa with your hands into a plastic-lined cardboard box or

other container, making the bottom about 2 to 3 inches thick. The walls of the hypertufa container should be at least 3 inches deep. Punch two drain holes in the bottom with your finger or a tool. When finished, clean your mixing tray immediately with a garden hose.

Leave outdoors to dry, about three or five days, until firm. Then remove your hypertufa planter from the box and plastic. Smooth, carve or shape to your satisfaction using a garden trowel, wire brush or other metal tool. For a smoother finish, moisten the

hypertufa and then coat the outside with dry Portland Cement. You can plant in containers approximately a week after they are made.

"There are as many methods and recipes as there are people making planters," McMahan said. "Sometimes I use sand instead of perlite, especially for small containers, because sand makes the pot heavier. Also, you can substitute finely ground peat moss for the coconut fiber, although coconut fiber is a better alternative from an environmental perspective."

## Deer-repellant plants defend yard

Learning to co-exist with deer could be easier than banishing them from your property entirely.

But waking in the morning to find tender, newly planted tomatoes with their tops bitten off can make even the most patient gardener unhappy.

A tall fence is the best insurance against deer damage; however, landscaping with deer-resistant plants can be an esthetically pleasing alternative, according to Nancy Allen, faculty member in the Fisheries & Wildlife Dept. at Oregon State University at Corvallis.

The worst deer damage usually occurs from late fall through early spring. Oregon mule deer and black-tailed deer each eat up to 7 pounds a day, from a selection of more than 500 types of plants. In the winter, they eat almost anything, including lichen, twigs, bark and evergreen boughs. Acorns are an important food in the fall.

"A plant can be deer-resistant, but not necessarily 'deer-proof,' for several reasons," Allen said. "Plants that

deter deer have a strong scent, thick or leathery leaves or fuzzy or spiny textures. Many are poisonous, some at all times, and others only at certain growth stages."

An OSU Extension publication (EC 1440), *Deer-Resistant Ornamental Plants*, lists deer-resistant plants as a general guide. The list of some 100 plants and their climate zones includes perennials as common as iris and columbine; shrubs such as jasmine and lilac; trees, including edible fig and Scots pine; and vines and ground covers, including poisonous nightshade.

"Deer sometimes will browse the plants listed and other times avoid plants not listed," Allen cautioned.

Many gardeners have found that fences of black plastic mesh keep deer out of gardens if they are at least 8 feet tall and supported with metal or wooden stakes. Five-foot fences will work if they are solid; deer usually won't jump when they can't see the other side.

Examples of other fences and more details are available

in another OSU Extension publication (EC 1557), *Reduce Deer Damage in Your Yard*.

"Deer have an acute sense of smell to locate food, and it can be used to our advantage," Allen said. "Certain scents can deter deer if used properly and reapplied often."

Commercial products are available, or there are home remedies such as hanging deodorant soap bars from trees or placing them around gardens. Pepper spray can be an effective repellent, as well as the odor of human hair, which can be rolled in balls and hung in trees or on stakes.

A dog can be an effective deterrent, as well, if allowed to run loose in a fenced yard, night and day, because deer feed at night. Fencing individual plants with black plastic mesh can protect them until they become established. Support the mesh with stakes or poles that provide plenty of space around the plant.

If you change your deterrent tactics throughout the year, deer will not become accustomed to them.

## OSU has tips for healthy tomatoes

The taste and fragrance of home-grown tomatoes make them one of the most popular plants to tend in home gardens. But summer heat can bring problems.

The Oregon State University Extension Service Master Gardener Program tracks the most common tomato problems and offers advice on what to do.

Late and early blight: "These are fungal diseases," said Barb Fick, OSU Extension horticulturist in Benton County. "It's usually caused by warm wet weather. Look for irregular, greenish

water-soaked spots on lower leaves and stems and pick them off."

Water your tomatoes around the base and not from above to avoid prolonged wetting of leaves. Make sure to give plants space. Stake and prune to keep air circulating and plants dry.

Blossom drop: Dry soil and dry winds can cause blossoms to fall off the plant, but a sudden cold spell, heavy rains or too much nitrogen can also be the problem. Usually not all blossoms will fall off, and another set of flowers will appear.

Blossom end rot: The

end of the fruit furthest away from the stem turns black, usually caused by irregular watering and calcium deficiency. Water deeply and regularly. Add lime to soil in the fall to increase the calcium level for next year's crop. Blossom end rot is most common in western Oregon.

\*Leaf rolling: This problem is most often the result of heavy pruning or root injury. Plants may lose leaves, but will recover.

For Master Gardener help, go online to your county Extension office at: <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/locations.php>.

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