

How To Make A "Hand-Carved" Stone Planter

By Jim Ruen

Antique chiseled stone troughs for garden planters are anything but cheap if you can find one. But you can easily make your own with the help of a book called *Making Concrete Garden Ornaments* by Sherri Warner Hunter, Lark Books.

The book offers clear and easy-to-follow directions for 24 projects ranging from simple to advanced. Custom recipes for various types of concrete mixes are detailed in the book.

I decided to try one of the ideas in the book. The "tufa" trough is made from a mix of Portland Cement and organic matter such as peat moss. The mix sets up in 6 to 8 hours, is easy to work with and then dries to the appearance of old hand-chiseled stone.

I first made a form out of two 10 by 34-in. side panels and two 10 by 10-in. end panels cut from 3/4-in. plywood. Sides and ends are butt screwed to form a simple rectangle. I coated the inside of the mold with used motor oil.

Once the form was prepared, I mixed up one part cement to three parts potting soil (without fertilizer). You can also use one part

cement to 1 1/2 parts peat moss, 1 1/2 parts perlite and 1/3 cup of polypropylene fibers.

You simply mix the dry ingredients and add water to a workable consistency. It's a good idea to mill the peat moss through 1/4-in. screening to remove large particles. Care should be taken to tamp down the mixture to eliminate air bubbles.

Once the casting has set for 6 to 8 hours, the form can be unscrewed and removed. Then the fun begins. Using only a kitchen knife, a putty knife or broken saw blade, hollow out the trough. A knife works best for edges, while the putty knife works great for removing excess material. The author suggests using a saw blade on the flat surfaces to give them more texture. I used a steel wire brush for the same purpose. This is also the best time to ream out a drain hole in the bottom of the trough.

Once you're done shaping the trough, leave it uncovered for another 10 to 12 hours. Then move the pieces outside, spray with water, wrap in plastic and cure for at least two weeks. Like any concrete, the longer it sits,



Writer Jim Ruen followed instructions in a new book to carve this planter out of stone.

the stronger it becomes.

Other beginner level projects include fos-

silized stepping stones, ornamental spheres, and planters. The stepping stones use a sand mortar mix and impressions from leaves, stems and other materials to create the appearance of fossils in the stones.

Advanced projects introduce more sophisticated techniques, using polystyrene forms and armatures. Armatures are cores of hardware cloth wrapped around tubes and covered with a high fiber content mix. The combination produces a strong but lighter structure than a simple form would allow.

Many of the projects in the book are the creations of professional artists and frankly held little interest for me. However, the recipes and clearly illustrated sections on forming, construction techniques and surface treatments were worth the \$17.95 price tag.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Jim Ruen, 107 Deer Ridge Road, Lanesboro, Minn. 55949 (ph 507 467-7770) or Lark Books, 387 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016; website: www.larkbooks.com.

Galloping Guinea Pig

It digs. It gallops. It hops. It jumps along on all fours at a rapid pace. According to one owner, the Patagonian Cavy is the "Guinea Pig From Hell."

Actually, the Cavy is the world's second largest rodent, measuring in at up to 2 1/2 ft. long and weighing up to 32 lbs. It has been clocked at 28 mph over a distance of 2/3 of a mile and can leap 7 ft. straight up into the air. This long-legged rodent with the body of a hoofed animal is a native of Patagonia, the highland prairies and grasslands of southern Argentina.

After seeing them at exotic animal auctions for years, Cindi Darling Winship finally bought a breeding pair and took them home to her ranch near Sparta, Mo. "We put them in a 12 by 12-ft. pen with a dirt floor and 10-ft. high chain link fence with concrete stem walls," recalls Darling. "They immediately started digging a hole under the wall to the next pen. Eventually the hole was big enough for a man to slide in."

The only thing that kept the oversized guinea pigs in the two pens was the 10-ft. wide asphalt floor that runs around the pen areas. So far, the Cavys haven't figured out they need a 10-ft. lateral tunnel to escape.

Darling's breeding pair has turned out several litters for her since she bought them. Monogamous for life, they will breed two to three times each year and produce from one to three babies after a 3-month gestation period. Young can be weaned after two to three months, by which time females are sexually mature. Males are sexually mature at six months.

"I expect the average market for Cavys runs \$200 to 250 each, although the market for animals tamed for pets is a whole different story," says Darling, an experienced exotic animal producer. "I have sold a few babies for \$150 each."

People planning to buy a Cavy for a pet are advised to buy one before it has been weaned and then bottle-feed it. This imprints the young animal on the owner. Pet Cavys



Native to southern Argentina, the Patagonian Cavy is a long-legged rodent with the body of a hoofed animal. It can be leashed and walked like a dog and is very affectionate.

can be leashed and walked like a dog and are very affectionate. Darling warns against raising them in a less than secure facility.

In nature, as many as 15 Cavy pairs can share a single burrow, and while they normally spend time in pairs, herds of as many as 70 head or more can travel together to find new grazing areas. In captivity, Cavys are often fed rabbit food, though Darling prefers to feed hers guinea pig food.

Darling warns people interested in buying a Cavy or any other exotic animal, to check with their local zoning officials and with the state Fish and Wildlife or Department of Natural Resources officials before writing out a check. Some species require a federal permit. "Any time you bring a non-native animal into an area and it escapes, they can be a problem if they survive," she adds.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Cindi Darling Winship, Liar's Lake Ranch, 1226 Liar's Lake Road, Sparta, Mo. 65753 (ph 417 634-4115; email: watusi@liarslake.com).

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Skunk Lady Knows Her Little Stinkers

Jane Bone's skunks may be descended, but they can be little stinkers just the same. In fact, she compares her pets to 2-year-old toddlers, always getting into things. After 200 years of domestication, pet skunks come in almost every shade but blue and green.

"They are wonderful little animals, very loyal and affectionate," says Bone. "But they go through the garbage and steal your clothes. You have to be a real animal lover to like them."

Bone more than qualifies, having kept pet skunks for more than 30 years. Augusta, Georgia, may be most well known for The Masters golf tournament. However, skunk owners everywhere know it as the home of the Skunk Lady. Her website, www.skunksaspets.com, is jam packed with skunk information.

Bone is not a skunk breeder, but she does operate a pet skunk rescue service out of her home. She takes in the sick, the obese and the diseased and nurses them back to health and old age, which can be more than 20 years.

"They are great problem solvers," she warns. "If they see something on a top shelf, they will sit and look at it until they figure out how to get it."

Bone warns prospective pet skunk owners to check with local fish and wildlife officials to see if state permits are required. Some states have an outright ban on skunk ownership, while others require a permit fee.

The second step in ownership is to find a reputable breeder, preferably one that has been in business for 5 to 10 years.

"Avoid backyard breeders at all costs," she says. "Sometimes they will go out in the woods and bring home wild skunks and claim they are domestic."

Having a good vet that is willing to work with skunks and is knowledgeable is vital, she adds. Skunks must be descented before they are 8 weeks old. They should be neutered before they are 3 to 4 months old.

Bone explains that skunks can get quite vicious if allowed to go into heat. "Skunks are savage breeders, as the female is an induced ovulator and has to be beaten up by the male to ovulate," she warns. "Your feelings, toes or fingers could get hurt."

Depending on where you are, a well-bred skunk may not come cheap. Bone says the price can vary from \$100 in some areas to as much as \$400 to 800 in Florida. The Skunk Lady offers to suggest reputable breeders she knows throughout the country.



"Skunks are loyal and affectionate, but you have to be a real animal lover to like them," says Jane Bone, Augusta, Georgia, who's known as the Skunk Lady.



Bone isn't a skunk breeder, but she operates a pet skunk rescue service out of her home. She takes in the sick, the obese and the diseased and nurses them back to health and old age, which can be more than 20 years.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Jane Bone, 3315 Limber Twig Lane, Augusta, Ga. 30906 (ph 706 792-9737, email: JaneBone@aol.com; website: www.skunksaspets.com).