



## Get Creative with Tufa

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*Jim Ruen*

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With winter coming on here in Minnesota, it's time to empty out planters. One of my favorites is the tufa trough I made a few years back. It's about 10 inches high and wide by 34 inches long and looks like an old stone planter. It is actually a mix of Portland cement and organic matter. Lighter and more interesting looking than standard concrete, tufa is also an invitation to creativity.

As with any concrete work, wear rubber gloves. While the amounts will vary depending on how big a project you have in mind, mix one part Portland cement with three parts potting soil (no fertilizer) or with 1 1/2 parts peat moss, 1 1/2 parts perlite and 1/3 cup polypropylene fibers. Add water to a workable consistency.

Forms can be made from plastic, metal or wood. Cardboard will also work as a one-time form. The key is to remove the project from the form after it has set for six to eight hours. Handle it carefully as it hasn't achieved full hardness and can easily break if stressed too much. At this stage, it is still soft enough to be easily worked.

Using any sharp object, such as an old putty knife, kitchen knife or even a piece of saw blade, you can sculpt your creation. Create a textured effect on flat surfaces with a steel brush or with the edge of a saw. This is also a good time to drill a drain hole or two if you are making a planter.

Once you've made your alterations, let it sit for another 10 to 12 hours. Then spray it with water, and cover it in plastic. Let it cure for at least two weeks. As is the case with any concrete object, the longer it sits, the stronger it gets.

While I made a planter, your imagination is your only limit with tufa. Good starter projects include stepping stones or even ornamental spheres. For more information and ideas for working with tufa, pick up a copy of *Making Concrete Garden Ornaments* by Sherri Warner Hunter, Lark Books. She does a great job making working with tufa easy and rewarding.

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