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Issue 53 **Making a Sand-Cast Birdbath — Instructions**



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[Making A Birdbath — Video.](#)



[Gallery of Leaves.](#)

Materials
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large leaf • 1 bag of sand • 2 bags of concrete • Water • Plastic wrap • Tubular concrete form • Paint or concrete dye (optional) • Concrete sealer
Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bucket or mixing Tray for concrete • Hoe for mixing • crub brush • Paintbrush • Foam brush • 2 containers for paint and sealer

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Step one — Getting started. Make a sandpile. It's not often adults get to play in the sand, so here's your chance. You'll need enough for the entire leaf to rest on, plus a couple of inches around the edge to spare. This rhubarb leaf used all of a 40-pound bag. Any type of sand will do. Smooth it into a low dome, like I'm doing in the photo. The sandpile will support the concrete-covered leaf and create the shallow depression that holds the water.

There's one more thing to do before you mix the concrete: Cut a ring 2 inches wide from one end of the tubular concrete form. You'll use this later, in step five, to help form a lip that keeps the birdbath on the pedestal.



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After you've made your dome, cover it with plastic wrap like I'm doing in the photo at left. It will keep the sand from sticking to any concrete that might leak through a hole or run over the edge of the leaf. Use a little sand to weigh down the corners so the plastic doesn't blow away.



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Step two — Leaf time. Now you can lay the leaf face down on top of the plastic wrap. Many leaves will quickly, so wait to harvest it or keep it in a bucket of water until you're ready. Cut the stem off close to the base of the leaf. Make sure it extends a couple of inches past the leaf edges.

If the leaf you want to use has a hole in it, no problem. Just cut a piece from a different leaf and make a patch.



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Step three — Mix the concrete. Pour the dry concrete mix into a plastic bucket or mixing tray. Slowly add water until the mixture is the consistency of a thick brownie mix — just like the concrete in the photo here. It should be thick enough that it won't run off the leaf but not so thick that it can't be moved around easily. For this rhubarb leaf, it took about 3/4 of a 40-pound bag of vinyl patch concrete.



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Step four — Spread the concrete. After it's mixed, scoop some concrete onto the center of the leaf and begin working it toward the outer edges like I'm doing in the photo. It's a little like spreading out pizza dough — try to keep it even without tearing a hole. Those big veins that run down the middle of rhubarb leaves need plenty of concrete to cover them, so be generous there. Try to make it about 3/4 inch thick in the middle and taper it to 1/4 inch thick at the edges.

Since I was just making one birdbath here, I decided not to wear gloves. But if you're making several or you have sensitive skin, I'd recommend using latex or rubber gloves because the concrete really dries out your hands.



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Step five — Prepare a lip. Here's where the cardboard ring you cut in step one comes in. Set the ring onto the concrete surface toward the back center of the leaf where the concrete is thickest. Then place handfuls of concrete all the way around the outside of the ring, like I'm doing in the photo, smoothing it out as you go. This anchors the ring to the leaf and, when dry, the concrete will form a lip to keep the birdbath stable on the pedestal.

Once you have the leaf covered with concrete and the ring in place, cover the whole thing with plastic wrap. If it's hot outdoors or you're working in full sun, a piece of moist burlap on top will help it dry evenly. There are many conditions that influence how long it takes concrete to dry. A project this size should, generally, be ready for handling within 48 hours.

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Step six — Dry and clean. When the leaf has dried, but before you let it cure, carefully turn it over. In my experience, a big chunk along the edge you're holding is the 'most likely part to break off as you pick it up. So, if it's a really big leaf, have a friend help you turn it over so you can distribute the pressure more evenly.

Now you can pull off the plastic wrap and start peeling away the leaf. Most of it comes out easily, but there may be some pieces that are determined to stick.



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As you can see in the photo, I got out the scrub brush, and that took care of the rest. If some of the stems still don't come out, just leave them for a few days. They'll dry out and be easier to pull or spray out with a hose. As soon as you've cleaned the top, turn the leaf over again and carefully peel the cardboard ring from the lip you built into the bottom.

Even though the birdbath can be handled, the concrete needs to cure for about a week. Curing makes the concrete stronger. It's important not to let water sit in the birdbath until that week is complete.



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Step seven — Paint your leaf. To use your leaf as it is, just add a coat of environmentally friendly sealer, such as such as GBS, available online at <http://www.greenbuildingsupply.com/utility/showProduct/?objectID=1091> or look for a water based concrete sealer at your local hardware store, to protect it from the weather. If you're planning to paint the leaf, hold off on this step until the paint is dry.

If you want some color, grab your paintbrush, paints and start painting! For this leaf, I added about three drops of crimson acrylic paint, which I got at a craft store, to 2 cups water for a thin wash, which I'm painting on the leaf in layers in the photo above. It dries quickly and you can begin another coat almost as soon as you finish the first. I also brushed on a wash of cadmium orange hue in places to give some variation to the color. When I made this leaf, the concrete ran over the edge of the leaf onto the plastic wrap in places, which created a border around the actual shape of the leaf. So when I painted, I followed that edge because I liked the contrast between the color and the gray concrete. But you can paint right up to the edge, if you'd prefer.

I've also tried concrete dye, water color paint, oil paint and spray paint. You can see those results in our [online gallery](#). I built up acrylic, oil and water color paint in thin washes until I like the color. But you can also apply the paint thickly right out of the tube. However you decide to decorate your leaf, be sure to seal it with a coat or two of concrete sealer. This will help preserve the color and protect the concrete.

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