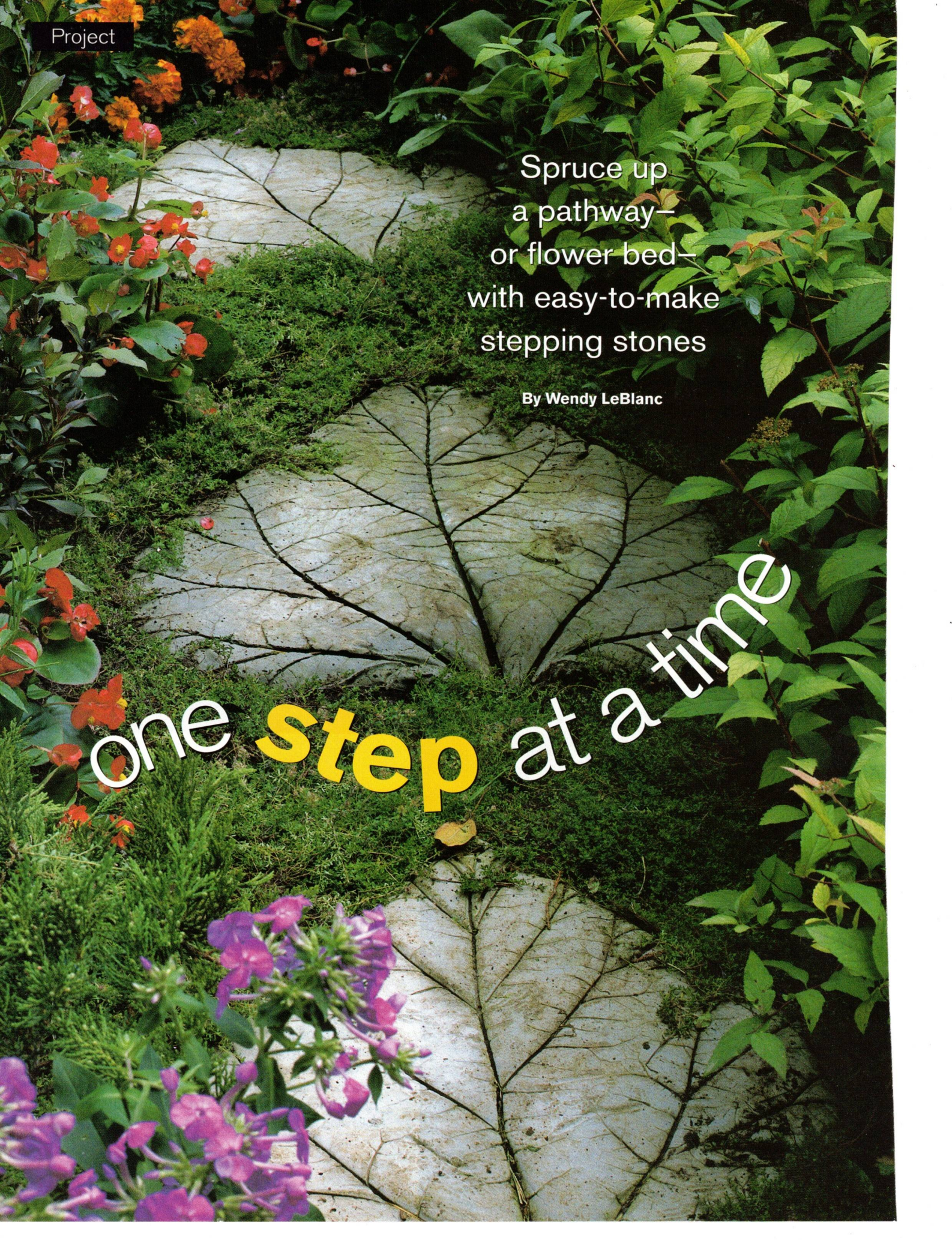




Project

Spruce up
a pathway—
or flower bed—
with easy-to-make
stepping stones

By Wendy LeBlanc

one **step** at a time

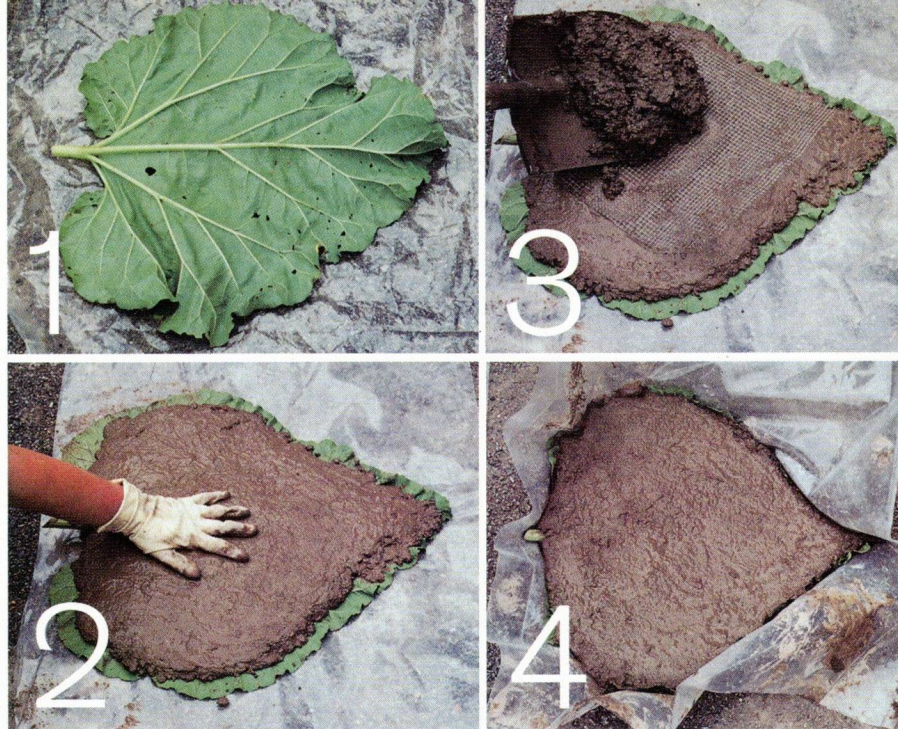
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hen I suggested to my husband we could make leaf-shaped stepping stones like ones we had seen in tropical gardens while on holiday in the Caribbean one year, he looked at me and laughed. And no wonder. Our garden is located on a plain of flat limestone covered with less than a foot of soil, and we'd spent the past dozen or so years removing rocks from it.

But I needed stepping stones to reach the back of the beds, and I knew I wouldn't be satisfied with ordinary rocks or even flagstones. He agreed, reluctantly, and we began experimenting with a number of ways to create them. Eventually, we came up with a method to produce leaf-motif stepping stones, as shown here, that are attractive, strong enough to support an adult's weight but light enough to move, and able to withstand winter temperatures below -25°C.

We used rhubarb leaves, but any leaves with large, numerous veins, such as hostas and ferns, would work. You can also make the stepping stones in other shapes following the method described here, and imprint a single leaf or a few leaves in an attractive arrangement on the surface.

If you've never used concrete before, rest assured it's easy to work with. All you need is a tub or wheelbarrow where you'll mix the concrete powder with water, and a trowel, hoe or shovel to stir it. Be sure to clean tub and tools with a jet spray of water immediately, before the concrete dries in place.



method

1. To make the stepping stones, choose an area that will remain undisturbed for several days. Any level surface—a driveway, concrete patio, bare patch of soil or even the grass—will work.

2. Cut a piece of plastic sheeting at least 15 centimetres larger all around than the leaf (or another desired shape), and place it on the ground. Put the leaf in the centre of the plastic, vein-side up (**Photo 1**).

3. Mix the concrete to a stiff consistency, following package instructions. With gloved hands or a shovel, move concrete onto the leaf, spreading it almost to the edge of the leaf to a thickness of approximately 2.5 to four centimetres; press firmly to eliminate air bubbles (**Photo 2**). If you're using a small leaf or several leaves to create an imprint only, spread the concrete to form the shape you want.

4. To ensure strength and durability, place chicken wire on the concrete to within five centimetres of the edge, overlapping pieces if necessary. Shovel concrete on top of the chicken wire (**Photo 3**), again spreading to a thickness of about 2.5 to four centimetres and pressing firmly to eliminate air bubbles.

5. Gently lift the plastic up around the design (**Photo 4**), smooth edges with gloved hands or a trowel to ensure an even look, and place earth or gravel up around the form to support it while it cures.

6. Cover with a second piece of plastic to keep the concrete from drying out. Allow to cure for at least 48 hours, then lift the stepping stone from the plastic (the plastic peels away easily) and turn it over to see the walking surface.

7. Remove small pieces of vein or leaf with a hose turned to jet spray. If you've made the stepping stone in hot weather, much of the leaf will have already decomposed.

8. You can place the stones in the garden immediately, but avoid stepping on them until the concrete has completely cured—curing time depends on the type of concrete mix used, but it usually takes five to seven days. Spray with water frequently during the curing period. Make sure the stones are set firmly in the ground and they won't move when walked on.

materials

- Rubber gloves
- Heavy plastic sheeting
- Leaves
- Pre-mix concrete. One standard-size bag will make three of the leaves shown here, which are about 45 centimetres square and eight centimetres thick
- Mortar or cement colourant, if you want a colour other than the light grey that pre-mix concrete produces
- Chicken wire or one-centimetre-square wire mesh
- Wire cutters