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## Portland Press Herald Maine Sunday Telegram

### Planters with personality!

Who says functional can't be fun or beautiful?

By MEREDITH GOAD/Staff Writer

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Gordon Chibroski/Staff Photographer

Valerie McCaffrey carves faces into her concrete planters. "You don't know what's going to happen," she says.

Valerie McCaffrey always loved concrete garden sculptures, but never enough to buy any of them.

"They were just a little too mass-produced for me," she said.

So last summer, the 45-year-old South Portland artist started playing around with concrete herself. The result? Whimsical planters with quirky faces on them – some round and cheery mugs, some long and totem-like visages, and some that are almost abstract.

"I think it's kind of cool to see faces out in the garden," she said.

It's certainly different. And with spring (let's hope) just around the corner, it's time to start thinking about new and different ways to show off this year's plants.



Photo courtesy Lunaform

Lunaform has a line of classic-looking planters, and often customizes its pieces.

Sure, you can always take a trip down to the local big-box store and load up on plastic planters. They're functional, and they're inexpensive. But there are more stylish alternatives, and many of them are Maine-made. Think playful, elegant, even traditional – but think outside the big box.

#### FACE TO FACE

McCaffrey had been drawing faces for years, so it's no surprise they showed up when she started hand carving concrete in her home studio on Ballard Street.

"To me, they're like charcoal drawings," she said. "They're that immediate. But at the same time, they can be used and enjoyed by other people."

The process begins with making a round form out of sheet metal and masking tape. McCaffrey pours in the concrete, then lets it set for





Gordon Chibroski/Staff Photographer

three to four hours. When she peels back the form, she has a canvas of soft-like concrete she can carve like butter.

Concrete planters by Valerie McCaffrey in her Ballard Street studio in South Portland.

"And then you have about eight hours," she said. "It gets progressively harder and harder, but that's great, because then you can carve finer and finer details."



Photo courtesy Lunaform

Lunaform has a line of classic-looking planters, and often customizes its pieces.

Her inspiration comes from various places, from 16th-century Italian gardens to Indian art.

Another technique she uses involves pouring sand into a large box. McCaffrey digs a hole in the sand, pours in the concrete, and the sand acts like a mold.

"That one's really good for me, because it already feels like you have something that needs to come out, or a shape is coming out," she said. "So you just kind of bring it out, and you're surprised. You don't know what's going to happen. You're just like a channel for this thing."



Courtesy Maine Bucket

Maine Bucket makes wood planters in cheery colors.

Some of the faces are carved with sayings, such as "Be Here Now" or "Grow," but McCaffrey has decided she doesn't like that direct approach.

"It's almost like I'm telling people what to do," she said, laughing. She's decided to start researching Latin and Sanskrit phrases to use on future planters.

McCaffrey's planters recently went on sale at a local home and garden show. She's priced them between \$65 and \$225. She plans to hold an open studio the first two weekends in May.

For more information, visit [ballardstreetstudio.com](http://ballardstreetstudio.com).

## PLANTER SHOPPING

**WALK INTO ANY** garden center in spring, and you'll find a dizzying array of planters. How do you decide which ones will help your plants grow and thrive?

**ARCHITECTURAL STYLE** is important in choosing a planter, but form should always follow function, according to Lois Berg Stack, a specialist in ornamental horticulture for the University of Maine's Cooperative Extension Service. Here are her thoughts on what to consider when shopping for a planter:

## ART FOR OUTDOORS

Lunaform, a coastal Maine studio in Sullivan, is known for its classic-looking garden planters and elegant urns.

Owners Phid Lawless and Dan Farrenkopf have studied architecture and sculpture, and developed their own process for making concrete vessels of unusual strength. Their work has a timeless feel, with Greek, Roman and Asian influences, and has been featured in publications such as The New York Times, Washington Post, House & Garden and Martha Stewart Living.

Most of Lunaform's pieces range in price from a couple hundred dollars to well over \$1,000, but are built to last. Each planter is made of steel-reinforced concrete hand-turned on a wheel. The customer can choose the color and textural finish when placing an order.

## SIZE

**THE SIZE** OF the planter should be based on the size of the plant to be grown. There is no "one size fits all." A five-gallon container would hold just one tomato, but a two-gallon container would be large enough to plant several parsley plants.

**OFTEN, TOO MANY** plants are placed in containers. Planters should be large enough to hold enough growing medium to support healthy plant growth. A small volume of growing medium holds less water and nutrients than a larger volume, meaning plants are unable to develop to their full potential. It also means less water is available to the plants in the heat of midsummer, and they'll have to be watered more frequently, even daily.

## SHAPE

**TALLER POTS DRAIN** more quickly than lower-profile pots. Plants that require very well drained soil (rosemary and many other herbs) would perform well in a taller pot.

**PLANTS THAT REQUIRE** a more moist soil would do better in a lower-profile pot.

**THE SHAPE OF** the pot also influences whether or not the root ball can easily be removed from the pot. If the lip of the container is narrower than the portion below it, for example, it's difficult to remove the root ball to pot a plant into a larger container.

## WATER MOVEMENT

**BE SURE TO** choose a planter with drainage holes. A saucer under the pot can catch excess water if that's a problem.

"We do a lot of custom work," said Kate Caivano, a spokeswoman for the company. "I would say about one in every four orders has some sort of customization, whether they really like a certain piece, but they want it 12 inches taller, or they want it truncated. Sometimes people want to add things as whimsical as a little frog on the side of the pot, or sometimes they'll have peoples' initials they want engraved in the piece, or the name of the house or something like that."

One customer sent in a piece of stucco from the side of her house and asked the artisans to match the color.

Lunaform's liquid metal finishes are made of the same sturdy material that's used on roofs – ideal for surviving Maine winters – and give the planters a copper or bronze patina that turn them into works of art.

The metal patinas are "really fun to work with," Caivano said, "because we could have a pot that looks like a brand-new penny, or we could have a pot that looks like it's been buried in the Aegean Sea for a thousand years."

Turnaround time for a Lunaform planter averages eight to 12 weeks. To see more Lunaform designs and check pricing, go to [lunaform.com](http://lunaform.com).

## BURST OF COLOR

Diane Tortorich, a horticulturist and manager at Maine Bucket in Lewiston, is the first to admit that wood planters might seem, well, a little boring.

Add some color, though, and their popularity soars.

"Since three years ago, I started throwing purples and bright greens and really vivid colors on our wood, (and) it has totally revived the product line," she said. "And these were lines that were not stagnant, but not exciting as far as numbers. The minute we started staining, everything started flying off the shelves again."

Maine Bucket manufactures planters of all shapes and sizes out of northern white cedar and pine. Cedar takes paint with one coat, making it easy to brighten up a shady area on your deck with planters painted in bold colors.

"They're readily stainable and paintable, so if you have them one year in a blue and next year you decide you want them in a green, you can do that," Tortorich said.

Deck rail planters have also been increasing in popularity, thanks to the trend of bringing living areas outdoors.

"Inevitably, they're higher maintenance as far as watering is concerned, but so are the plastics and the resins," Tortorich said.

#### **CONSTRUCTION MATERIAL**

**CONTAINERS SHOULD** be made of a material that is durable and able to be cleaned.

Wood planters don't last as long as plastic ones, but that's considered a plus by green-conscious consumers.

"Plastic ones will last forever in the landfill as well as in your yard," Tortorich said.

**DECORATIVE POTS** (those that are hand-painted and perhaps not able to be cleaned) are best used as cache-pots, to hold slightly smaller pots that directly hold the plants and growing medium.

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**THE TYPE OF** material also affects temperature. Plastic pots warm up quickly in the sun. Metal pots warm up even more quickly. Organic pots, such as wooden pots, warm up more slowly in the sun but hold heat during cool spring and autumn nights. Generally, soils that are cooler than the air to which plant stems and leaves are exposed support the best growth.

**COLOR ALSO PLAYS** a role. Black pots warm up very quickly in the summer sun, while light-colored pots remain much cooler.