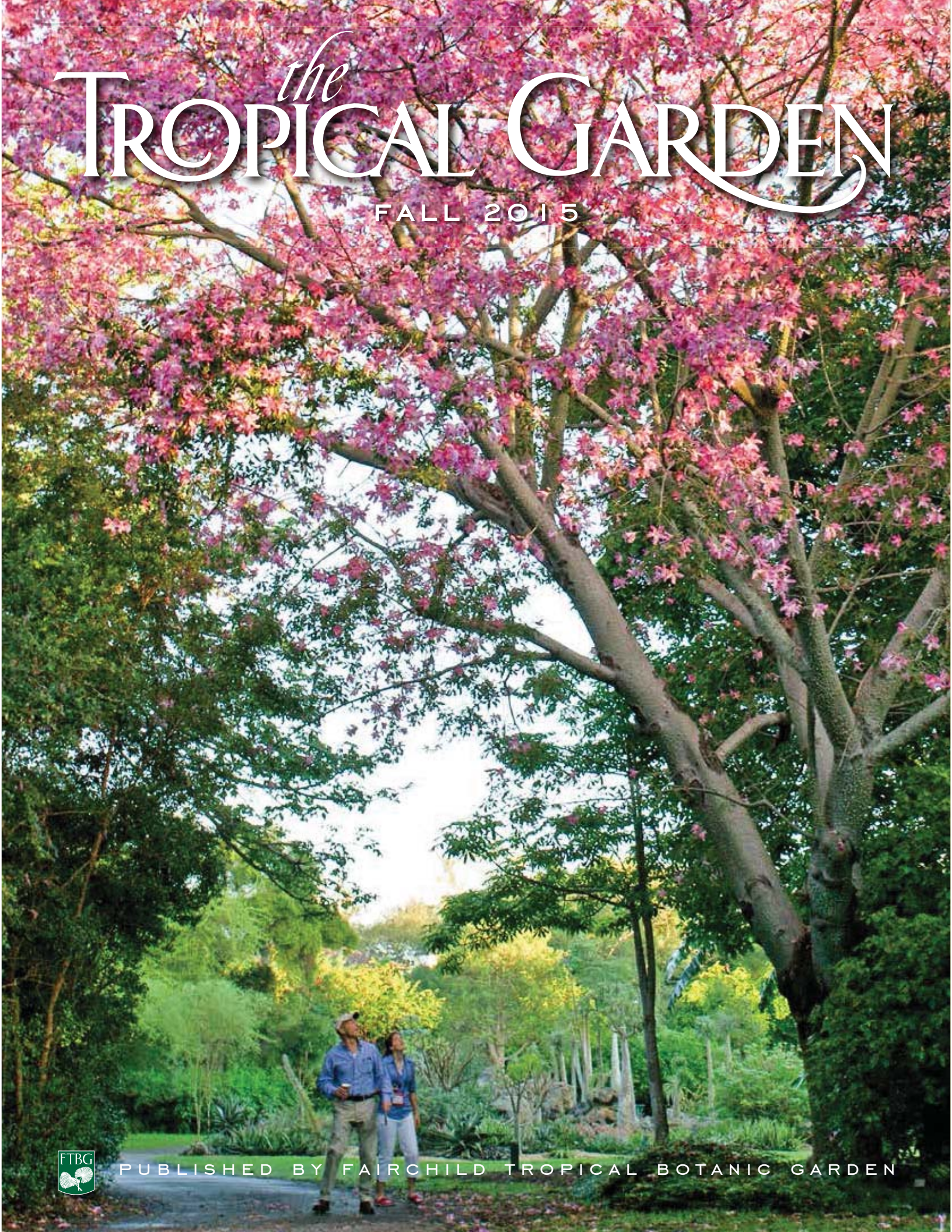
the TROPICAL GARDEN

FALL 2015



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FEATURES

DEPARTMENTS

Container Gardening: Make Your Own Hypertufa Pots

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"Where are you going to put all your plants?" It's a question every gardener has been asked at one time or another. You can't ever have too many plants, but you can run out of space for them in the ground. Containers are an answer, allowing you to move plants around and better maintain soil quality. Here's a method for making your own pots and garden ornaments, exactly as you want them, for very little cost.

Hypertufa is a material meant to simulate tufa, a type of limestone often carved into troughs, pots and ornaments. Hypertufa can be molded to just about any shape, is strong and fairly light, plus it can be fashioned or stained to look like natural, hewn stone. The basic ingredients in hypertufa are Portland cement, peat moss and perlite, though many variations exist.

Supplies

Portland cement
Perlite
Peat moss
Container to mix the ingredients
Plastic wrap
Plastic trash bag
Wood dowels
A mold (see below)
Paint stirrer or something similar for mixing
Disposable gloves
Dust mask
Wire brush or metal file

All of these are available at your local home improvement store.

The Mold

Hypertufa mixture needs to dry on, or inside, a mold. There are numerous possibilities, like covering the outside of an upside-down plastic bowl, or filling the space inside a box. I'm taking the box approach to yield a trough-shaped planter using an old plastic bin as the mold.

Molds can be made of cardboard, plastic or wood. Cardboard is cheap, and easy to work. It also tends to bulge out slightly due to the weight and moisture of the hypertufa mixture, which I feel gives the pot a more rustic, handmade look. You also need to place something *inside* the box mold to form what will be the cavity of the planter. Use a smaller box or make one from cardboard. Styrofoam also works. The floor and walls should be at least one-inch thick; the larger the pot, the thicker they should generally be.

You may drill drainage holes through the bottom of the pot after the mixture cures, but I prefer to place wood dowels (covered in plastic wrap) or plastic plugs at the bottom of the mold. These can be removed or more easily drilled through after the pot hardens.

I cut the dowels to one and a half inches long; they then serve as a depth guide when adding the mixture to form the bottom of the pot.

Line the mold with plastic wrap to ensure easy removal. It also helps hold in moisture necessary for the curing process.

Steps

First, spread newspaper or a dropcloth to protect floors from spilled cement. The mix will need to remain in place for at least 24 hours, untouched and out of the sun.

Combine the dry ingredients—Portland cement, perlite and peat moss. The simplest proportions are: one part cement, one part perlite, one part peat. Sift out any large chunks of peat.

Wearing gloves, mix with your hands until the dry ingredients are thoroughly distributed.

Pour in a small amount of water at first, maybe a cup, and mix thoroughly. As you slowly add more water, wait for the peat to absorb what you've added before adding more. Slowly pour in more water and stir until the mixture is like moist cookie dough—it should hold its shape when squeezed, but not be dripping wet.

Add this hypertufa mix to your mold to form the floor. Use the wood dowels as depth guides. You may reposition them as they will shift when adding hypertufa.

Place the inside section of the mold—which will form the cavity—atop the hypertufa floor you just poured. Now add the remaining mix to form the walls. Add a little at a time, alternating your way around all four sides to ensure thorough distribution. Use the stirrer to help push the mix down all four sides and to smooth the top edges.

Cover the entire mold with plastic. A trash bag works well. It needs to dry slowly, so mist twice a day, keeping the mold wrapped in plastic and out of direct sun. (I added a brick to the inside of the inner box to prevent it from collapsing.)

24 to 36 hours later, the hypertufa should be hard enough for you to remove the mold, cutting away the cardboard if necessary.

Now is the time to carefully texture the outside with a wire brush or file to simulate chiseled stone, and to smooth and round the top edges.

Let the pot sit in the shade for about 30 days for the final cure. Keep it wrapped in the plastic bag and moist the entire time. Before planting, your pot will need to be fully cured and free of excess lime, which can harm plants.

A Note on Curing

Although the hypertufa will feel hardened after only a day or two, the full curing process takes about 30 days. There are a few methods to help the cure go well. Some people submerge the piece in water during this time to leach out the lime and ensure the cure goes slowly.

However I thoroughly hosed down my pot and placed it inside a plastic bag to ensure high humidity. Keep it out of direct sun while curing. After 30 days, I hosed the piece thoroughly every day for a week to ensure it was not too alkaline for plants.