

Pots with impact

Nolan Mayrhofer thinks big when he makes his garden pots

BY SUSAN RAMSEY, SPECIAL TO TIMES COLONIST APRIL 25, 2009



Nolan Mayrhofer's monumental garden planters make a more assertive statement than a collection of little, mass produced pots would.

Photograph by: Darren Stone, Times Colonist, Special to Times Colonist

Trying to pin Nolan Mayrhofer down to a single design concept or idea is like trying to capture mercury on a plate. One thought quickly gives rise to two or three or 10 others as he explores the medium of his creative genius -- concrete.

This 34-year-old Kamloops transplant who came here 10 years ago to raise his family and enjoy the West Coast lifestyle is the sole owner of Szolyd Development, a manufacturer of concrete products that began with commissions for commercial and residential projects.

Mayrhofer employs a permanent staff of 11, and during peak production times the payroll can swell to more than 20.

Floors and countertops paved the way to experiment with concrete and, as Mayrhofer quickly discovered, concrete is a malleable material. It has limitless design potential. Mayrhofer said: "It has a

chameleon-like ability to take on colour, form and texture."

It can be stained any colour, burnished or left raw, have rough or smooth textures and be extremely strong. It can be made to look like marble or granite. It can take any shape.

He has developed three types of concrete:

T-ROC -- traditional concrete mix, which allows for precast or "hand packed" containers;

G-ROC -- a concrete mix that incorporates crushed, recycled glass; and D-ROC -- or Ductal -- a Lafarge proprietary mix that Nolan calls liquid steel.

"To my mind, this is one of the most progressive building materials in the world." The resulting projects can be much thinner and lighter than those using traditional concrete.

G-ROC is 85 per cent recycled materials. G-ROC is my favourite. Like a magpie, I like a little sparkle. Crushed glass from local breweries and wineries increases the glam content of this product. The custom countertop at Dockside Green's Café Fantastico is nothing short of fabulous. A G-ROC planter, placed in any garden, be it contemporary or traditional, would certainly be a dynamite focal point.

Mayrhofer, who has always been an entrepreneur, like so many energetic, creative women and men of his generation, really has no idea of working "inside the box."

In his mind, anything and everything is possible, and to that end he has created a line of outdoor living products that are beautiful, affordable, locally made and -- like a good tweed jacket -- will last and be loved a lifetime.

The skill sets required to craft a well-executed pot -- as with making a well-tailored jacket -- are many. The process from start to finish requires the skills of a woodworker, mould builder, sculptor and painter, to name a few.

A woodworker generally designs the mould but it can also be made from fibreglass or rubber. The moulds are laid on their side or cast vertically and filled with a dry "hand packed" mix. Often a craftsman or woman can be seen working inside a very large container.

At this stage, tints or oxides or recycled glass can be added to a base of white or grey Portland cement. The concrete is then packed into place using irregular patterns that create voids or veining. Sometimes a happy accident will produce the most intriguing effects.

Once the concrete is dry, the moulds are opened and the container is cleaned and sanded to take off the rough edges. A patch coat is applied to the surface to create highlights and drama. And then stains and waxes are applied to the finished pots. Each piece, even if cast from an oft-used mould, is

always one of a kind.

This line includes benches, tables, fire tables, water features, fireplace surrounds and wonderful pots. What I appreciate so much about Nolan's outdoors pieces is the scale. Many pots are large -- up to two metres tall. Even those pieces that are smaller have a large presence. Colours are also easy to use. Creams, greys, blacks and greens work well in all settings.

The scale of pots seems to be an issue many homeowners struggle with. Many homeowners choose pots that are far too small. Remember, your backdrop includes distant "borrowed" landscape and the sky. Many small pots makes for a "jumbly" effect. This look makes me anxious.

I really like how one wonderful pot, well planted (or even left empty), anchors a garden vignette. I am not a fan of the three nesting pots (always imports and created only for ease of shipping.) This look is high on my garden design "don'ts" list.

While many of Mayrhofer's projects are created for "the trade," he is presenting a show and sale of his outdoor living line today and tomorrow at 502 Craigflower Rd. Hours are 11 a.m. - 5 p.m. both days.

Recommended viewing for designers and gardeners.

Susan Ramsey is a Victoria floral designer and self-taught gardener.

theartfulgardener@gmail.com

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