

For most of us, the idea of a fountain calls up images of prancing putti and gushing gods: grand fixtures suitable for places like Versailles, but not for our backyards. The modest 3-foot geyser at right, however, should make you think again. Rising like a mini-Old Faithful from the granite blocks in a garden path, this fountain delights owner Nancy Voorhees' 6-year-old son, Kevin, and keeps her happy, too: no worries about little boys falling in, no soggy leaves to scoop out. Designers Yunghi Choi Epstein and Joanne Lawson, of Lawson Carter Epstein Landscape Architects in Washington, D.C. sited the fountain to form a "seamless part of a path," an unobtrusive focal point that can neatly disappear with the flick of a switch.

The secret of this on-again, off-again geyser is a small underground reservoir equipped with a recirculating pump that shoots water between the stones, which are supported by a metal grate (see illustration, page 40). The 1/2-horsepower pump is connected to an upright copper pipe; a flow valve, installed by a plumber, controls the height of the jet. An electrician hardwired the pump directly to the house, burying the cable deep in the ground and installing an electrical switch at the back door. The Voorhees reservoir was custom-made of poured-in-place concrete; the 2-foot-square cast-iron grate came from a commercial building supplier. It looks strong enough to hold an elephant and is certainly safe for humans to walk on.

Peter Niebauer, another of Epstein's clients, translated her design into a small "bubbler" with a 6-inch jet that he uses to rinse off his feet before entering the house after swimming. Spending about \$250 for materials, he completed the project in four hours and saved the additional \$750 that a professional installation would have cost him. Instead of pouring a concrete reservoir, he found a round plastic tub (24 inches across and 15 inches deep) at a garden supply store. After digging a hole several inches larger than the tub, in a level part of the garden, he lined the sides and bottom of the crater with gravel, then sand. Positioning the tub deep enough so that the stones, when in place on the grate, would be at ground level, he then backfilled the hole with more sand and gravel. From a fountain kit purchased at a home supply center, he installed a 1/2-horsepower pump with a telescoping delivery pipe and a control valve. At a fraction of the cost of a prefab grate, he had a welder build him a strong 2-foot square metal grill to cover the tub.

SIMPLER TO INSTALL THAN A CONCRETE BASIN, A PLASTIC TUB (1) WORKS FINE. PAIRED FLOWPOTS FILLED WITH LAVA ROCK (2) ACT AS A FILTER FOR THE SUBMERSIBLE PUMP (3); WATER SURGE IS ADJUSTED BY THE PIPE'S FLOW VALVE (4). LANDSCAPE CLOTH OR POLYETHYLENE SHEETS (5) REDUCE WEEDS AND DEBRIS. A STURDY METAL GRATE (6) KEEPS WATER CLEAN AND KIDS SAFE; IT'S EASILY CAMOUFLAGED BY STONES (7).

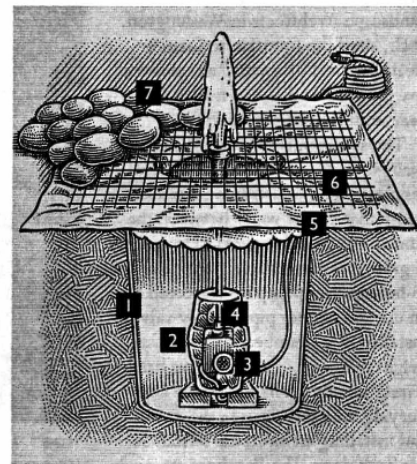


ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN SPROULS

Landscape cloth spread over the grate filters out debris and prevents weed growth. (Other tips for keeping the pump clean are to set it on a brick, elevating it from the reservoir floor, where residue collects, or to enclose it in paired flowerpots filled with lava rock to filter out muck.) In the winter, the pump can easily be removed and stored indoors.

Niebauer ran the pump's electrical cord aboveground to an outdoor outlet, camouflaging the cord with stones and plants. To achieve just the right bubbling effect, he filled the tub and adjusted the valve, playing with the water's force. Flat black Mexican pebbles disguised the grate, and larger pieces of flagstone hid the edges of the tub.

The Voorhees and Niebauer fountains are only two of the many possible variants of this design. Paving materials can be as massive as a millstone or as finely textured as a pile of shiny, colorful pebbles (landscape cloth over the grate keeps them from falling through). You can tuck this kind of fountain into the tiniest yard, the corner of a patio, or the edge of a lawn. This summer that splashing cherub in the garden could be your own offspring.

As an alternative pre-cast fountains are not a bad option. The below fountain was installed very quickly. Call or email Diane Meucci for suggestions and sources.



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