

*terra-cotta*

BY SUSAN GUAGLIUMI

# Transformation

“Repurposing” is trendy these days, from jewelry to home decor. Not only does it test your creativity, it reduces waste and saves money. Veteran crafter Susan Guagliumi, who began creating garden tools and accessories while restoring her former 1830s home several decades ago, has found new ways to repurpose everything from newspaper to bottle caps and watering hoses. Here she offers instructions on how to turn ordinary terra-cotta pots and a section of terra-cotta pipe into what she calls a “mother” pot with multiple planting spaces—perfect for growing a variety of plants on a patio, balcony, or anywhere room is limited.



This article on reusing terra-cotta pots is an adapted excerpt from Susan Guagliumi’s recent book, **Handmade for the Garden** (photographs by John Gruen, illustrations by Sun Young Park, published by Stewart, Tabori & Chang, New York, 2014, \$27.50), which offers a variety of do-it-yourself garden-themed projects. Used with permission from the publisher.

**I** BEGAN CUTTING UP flowerpots after an inspiring trip to Mexico. Once I started, I was amazed at how easy it was and how many uses I had for the cut pots. “Mother pots”—large pots with smaller pots attached—are fairly common in Native American, Mexican, and South American pottery traditions. I decided to make my own with terra-cotta pots I had on hand. These pots make compact, space-saving planters for herbs, strawberries, or ornamentals that are practical to grow in groups.

## TIPS FOR MAKING A MOTHER POT

While a finished mother pot looks very complicated, it’s actually easy to make and involves two basic steps: cutting several flowerpots in half and then adhering the cut pots to the mother pot.

Cutting flowerpots in half is incredibly simple—and fairly messy—so cover the work surface with lots of newspaper, and make sure to wear a dust mask and eye protection while you work. In addition to using a file to smooth cut edges, you can use tile nippers to remove bumps and notches on the edges or to shape edges to fit the curve of the mother pot.

Keep in mind that simply cutting most pots in half will yield two pieces that are both a bit too small to plant. Instead, try to cut off about a third of the pot so that you are left with a larger, more “plantable” section to attach to the mother pot or other surface. Then save the smaller cut-off section for drainage in other pots or for other uses.

*For step-by-step instructions on how to make the mother pot shown on the opposite page, turn to page 30.*

**Opposite:** It is easier to attach the cut pots to a flat surface than to a curved one. Square terra-cotta flue pipe, available in 8-inch and 12-inch widths, makes a great “mother pot” and a terrific, space-saving herb planter.



JOHN GRUEN FROM HANDMADE FOR THE GARDEN



# How to Make a Mother Pot

## SUPPLIES

- Assorted terra-cotta flowerpots (especially chipped or badly damaged pots)
- Large section of flue pipe (8-inch or 12-inch [20 cm or 30 cm] square)
- Barn board, or other surface for adhering cut pots
- Hacksaw (or tile saw) fitted with carbide-grit hacksaw blade Stanley #15-410)
- Construction adhesive (for masonry, stone, or terra-cotta)
- Solvent (check the adhesive's directions)
- Tile nippers
- Coarse file
- Coarse-grit sandpaper
- Wood blocks or empty coffee cans (if working with multiple cut pots)
- Rags
- Duct tape
- Pencil
- Newspaper
- Safety goggles and dust mask

### 1 BEGIN CUTTING VERTICALLY ACROSS BOTTOM OF POT

On a work surface covered with newspaper, place the pot upside down, and begin cutting vertically through the bottom, positioning the hacksaw so that you cut the pot into sections that are about a third and two-thirds of the original pot. Be aware that the bottom and upper rims of the pot are usually a little thicker than its side walls.

### 2 FINISH FIRST CUT FROM OPPOSITE DIRECTION

Unless you have a very large hacksaw with a wide bite, it will probably be impossible to cut the pot entirely from one direction. When the saw's frame starts to knock against the pot, turn the pot over and work from the top end. Cut through the rim, connecting with the first set of cuts as evenly as possible. There is apt to be some difference between the cuts, but you can correct that later with a coarse file. When cutting very large pots, you will need to hold the pot on its side, and work one side at a time. Work back and forth between the two sides to avoid cutting one side through totally because the other side might snap from the pressure.

### 3 SMOOTH POT'S CUT EDGES

When the pot separates into two pieces, place the cut edge of the two-thirds section on a flat surface. (Set aside the one-third section for another use.) If there are bumps that prevent the two-thirds

section from lying flat, use the coarse file or the tile nippers to smooth them out.

### 4 SHAPE POT'S BOTTOM TO FIT NEW SURFACE

If you want to apply the cut pot to a larger round pot, you will probably need to notch or curve the bottom of the pot by filing it carefully. If you plan to apply the pot to a flat surface, like a length of flue pipe, you won't have to worry about this unless you want to adhere it to one of the flue pipe's square corners. In that case, you will need to shape the bottom of the pot to fit the corner so that the pot's sides are flush with the sides of the flue pipe. Also make sure the bottom of the pot still allows some space for drainage. Finally, use a rough file to remove any bumps or high spots, and check the cut pot against the surface of the mother pot to be sure it fits as snugly as possible.

### 5 MARK CUT POT'S POSITION ON MOTHER POT

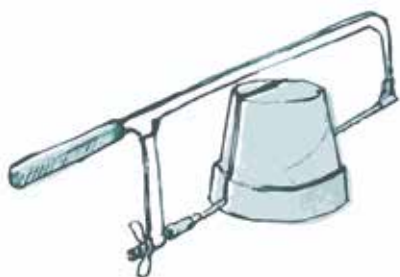
Position the mother pot on its side. Position one cut-pot section on the mother pot, and use a pencil to trace the cut pot's inside edges on the surface.

### 6 APPLY ADHESIVE TO MARKED POSITION

Spread the adhesive just inside the pencil lines. Use construction adhesive for attaching cut pots to terra-cotta, masonry, or stone surfaces.

### 7 POSITION CUT POT ON MOTHER POT

Let the adhesive sit for five to 10 minutes. Place the cut pot onto the mother pot,



**1** Begin by turning the pot upside down to saw through the base and partway through the sides.



**2** When the frame of the saw prevents you from cutting further, turn the pot over and continue cutting from the rim. Try to align the two cuts.



**3** Save the smaller pieces for making plant markers or for drainage in the bottom of larger pots.

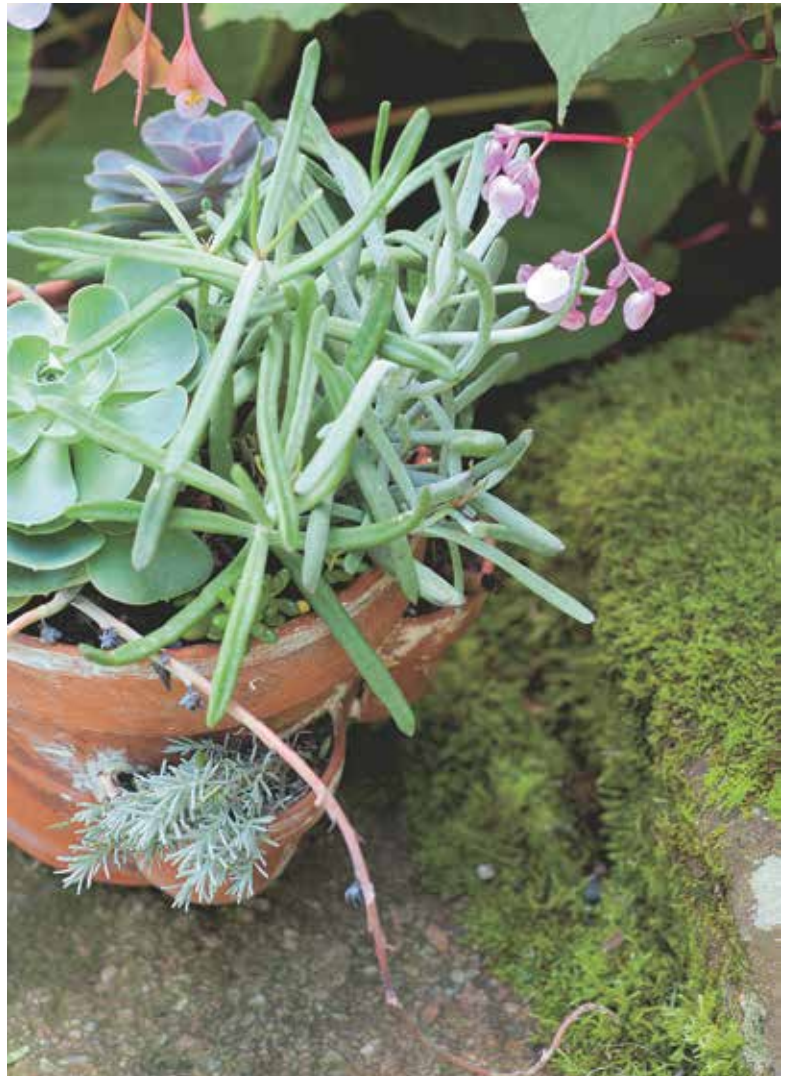
and wiggle the cut pot slightly to move the adhesive around a bit. Let them sit undisturbed for five minutes. Then, lift the pot very slightly off the surface and replace it, which helps the glue grab the surface. Moisten a rag with the solvent, and clean up any excess adhesive or glue outside the edges of the pot. The glue on the inside will not show once the pots are full of soil. Gently tape the pots in place with duct tape to hold them tightly while they dry.

### 8 WORKING WITH MULTIPLE CUT POTS

If you want to attach cut pots all around the mother pot, you will need to let all the cut pots on one side adhere fully before adding cut pots on the next side. Eventually you may need to work with the pot positioned vertically to avoid breaking or damaging the first pots you attached. If you're working vertically, use some blocks of wood or empty coffee cans to prop up the pots you're gluing on while you tape them in place to dry. It will take about 24 hours for construction adhesive to fully cure.

Once the adhesive is dry, you can apply more adhesive from the inside of each pot if you think you need it, but try to leave the drainage hole open on the bottom of each cut pot. If you missed cleaning off any blobs of wet adhesive, use a single-edged razor blade to remove them once the adhesive is dry and the added pots are set.

*Susan Guagliumi gardens and crafts in Northford, Connecticut.*



In order to fit the cut pots to the curve of the mother pot, the author used a coarse file to shape the bottom of each cut pot so that it lies flush against the curved surface of the larger pot. This pot was also finished with a coat of lime for an aged effect.



**4** Use a coarse file to remove any bumps that prevent the larger piece from lying flat on the surface of the mother pot.



**5–6** Lightly trace the cut pot's inside edges onto the mother pot and then spread the adhesive inside the lines.



**7** Position the cut pots on one side of the mother pot and use duct tape to hold them fast while the adhesive dries.