

# Contemporary Rustic Planter

by Sarah McCarthy

Ever since I started my journey with clay, I have lived in a rural place. After college I moved to the Smoky Mountains to live with some friends, where I stumbled upon Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts. After years of community classes, I began taking week-long workshops and spent a summer as a studio assistant, working with some great potters.

I now live in a small town in the Blue Ridge Mountains making pots and spending as much time as possible outside. My home and studio are surrounded by woods, plants, and little trees in pots. Breaks from inside studio work usually involve sipping tea outside among the green things. The ceramic planter that I make is a natural evolution of my love for the natural world.

## A New Transition

The handmade planter is one of those useful forms that's a nice deviation from the utilitarian pot for food. Although pots for food are usually necessary and rewarding forms for a potter, I find making planters in the spring marks a new season, a transition from cold and wind to brighter skies with blooming azaleas and dogwood flowers. I enjoy handing off my planters knowing the new owners will place a favorite plant inside to also enjoy the spring season of new beginnings and growth.

I throw many of my forms without a bottom: mugs, vases, teapots, pitchers, and serving dishes. Planters are also thrown without a bottom, so I can create a squared-off form that complements my surface designs, including the rectangular sprigs that add color to the form. I add a squared slab to the bottom and leave a little extra flange to create a more rustic foot. For these planters, I use Craggy Crunch clay body from Highwater Clays, which is typically a handbuilding clay because of its high grog content. This clay body has a rustic feel that works well for a planter, and I chose it for the visual appeal of the grog after it's fired. I use an iron-oxide wash on the entire form and only use glaze for my sprig designs.

## Beginning Construction

To begin, throw a bottomless cylindrical form around 7–10 inches in height and 7–9 inches in diameter on the wheel (1). You're essentially throwing a sidewall and will add a slab bottom later, once you have altered the form. Rib marks and throwing marks are welcome as they add to the planter's rustic feel. Allow the form to set up for a few hours so it can be handled and the round form can be altered.

Next, take the bottomless cylinder off the wheel or bat and place it on a foam bat to loosely square the vessel. Square off the rim first. Find a starting place and create the first corner with the front of your index finger. Now find the opposite side on the rim from your starting point and square that off (2).





1 Throw a bottomless cylinder around 7–10 inches tall and 7–9 inches in diameter.



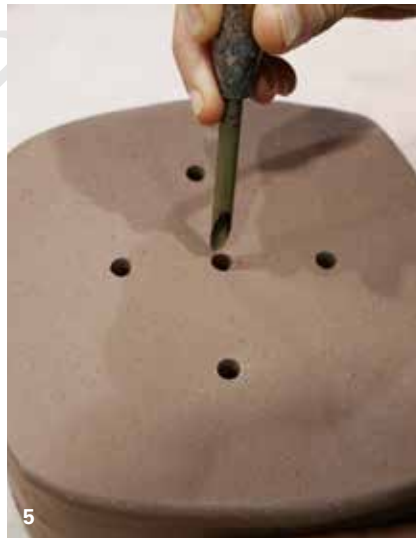
2 Use your fingers to square off the rim to create a four-sided form.



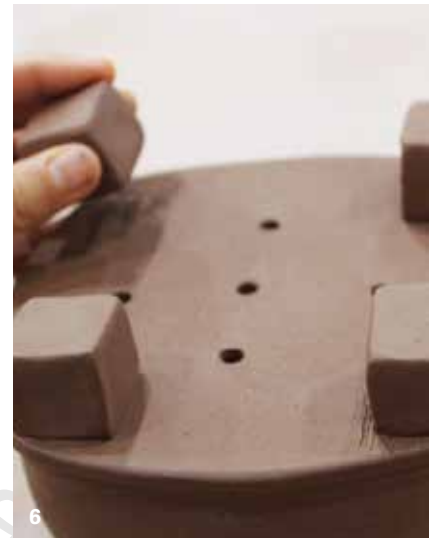
3 Run your fingers from the bottom up the inside to the rim to define the corner.



4 Roll out a slab  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch larger than the cylinder's bottom, then join the two.



5 Create drainage holes in the bottom of the pot with a teapot hole cutter.



6 Add four square feet to the slab bottom, one on each corner.



7 Roll and cut rectangular sprigs for surface designs on the pot's exterior.



8 Score, slip, then join the rectangular sprigs to the exterior walls.



9 Use a paintbrush to smooth score marks after adding the sprigs.



Square off the remaining two corners. Turn the pot over and square off the bottom at four points to match the rim. Run your fingers along the interior from each of the bottom corners up the side of the pot to the rim to define the squared-off form (3).

### Adding a Bottom to the Pot

To add a bottom slab to the square pot, roll out a slab about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch larger than the bottom of the pot. Add the slab by slipping and scoring (4). After running your fingers along the seam where the slab and sidewall meet to reinforce the join, use a paintbrush to smooth the seams. Cut the slab and leave about  $\frac{1}{16}$  inch (1–2 mm) of extra clay for a foot that will be a bit larger than the pot. Use your fingers to smooth and round over the sharp edges where the slab was cut. This foot adds to the rustic aesthetic of the pot, creating space and texture for iron oxide to settle when it is rubbed onto the bisque ware later.

Leave the added bottom to set up for a few hours. Once the bottom firms up a bit, flip the pot over. Using a teapot hole cutter (you can also use a knife), cut 4–5 holes out of the bottom, about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches from the outer edge (5). If you use a knife to make the holes, leave them small so that soil will not be able to pass through them when watering. Cover the piece loosely to dry.

Cubed feet add height and character to this planter, complement the square form, and give water a place to drain. The easiest way to start forming the cubed feet is to cut them directly out of a block of clay. Using a fettling knife, cut 4 cubes of clay, anywhere from  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 inches across. Complete each cubed foot by

tapping the 6 sides on a canvas table multiple times to create an even surface on each side of the cube. Use your fingers to smooth the edges. Attach each cube to one of the bottom corners of the planter, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch in from each edge (6).

Flip the planter over and run your fingers firmly but gently over the inside of the bottom where the cubed feet meet the slab to make sure the connection of the cube and bottom slab is secure.

### Finishing Touches

The last step is to add sprigs to each face of the planter. Roll out a thin slab and cut out long, thin, rectangular strips or any shape you wish (7). Add 3–5 vertical strips to each face of the planter. On two sides, I create slightly shorter horizontal sprigs to vary the design (8). Smooth over the join with your finger and clean up the seams using a damp paintbrush (9).

To finish the planter, bisque fire to cone 06. After bisque firing, use a sponge to rub iron-oxide wash (iron oxide mixed with water at a 1:4 ratio) on the inside and outside of the pot, then rub off the excess, leaving the desired finish. Add glazes to the raised surface design with a brush, then fire to cone 6 in an electric kiln.

To complete the planter, plant your favorite spring flowers and place on your deck or porch to enjoy!

*Sarah McCarthy is a full-time studio potter living in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Floyd, Virginia. She exhibits nationally and is a member of 16 Hands Studio Tour. For more, visit [www.sarahmccarthypottery.com](http://www.sarahmccarthypottery.com), [16Hands.com](http://16Hands.com), and Instagram [@sarahmccarthypottery.com](https://www.instagram.com/sarahmccarthypottery.com).*