

Desert Magic

Capture the beauty of
cactus in bloom

Objectives

- Make a realistic ceramic sculpture
- Use tools to add texture and other details to a sculpt

Preparation Tips

It's important to avoid creating air pockets in the clay and to eliminate air bubbles as soon as you see any. A sealed air pocket will cause the clay to explode during firing.

- You can lay one piece of clay over another, but never fold the clay
- Press pieces together firmly and give them a slight back-and-forth wiggle to join the clay tightly and squeeze out any trapped air
- If you see an air bubble below the surface of the clay when you roll out a slab, break it open with the point of a cleanup tool

By Susan Markovic Baker

In spring, Arizona's dry, unfriendly desert magically turns into a scenic view of brilliant color. Prickly pear cactus pads have a blue-green color with splashes of purple, and bright pink or yellow flowers. Create your own Desert Magic with this handbuilt piece. It'll be so original, even you won't be able to produce another just like it!

The Log

As you make the log, create a picture in your mind of an old piece of wood with holes and irregular ends, as if it were a branch that broke from a larger piece.

Step 1: Wad a single page of newspaper page into a tight ball. Open the paper and roll it into a loose log shape from top to bottom.

Step 2: Use about one pound of clay and press it into a long channel with your thumbs. Make it just wide enough to wrap around the paper log – be careful not to press the clay too wide. There should be just enough clay to wrap around the width of the paper log and the clay should be long enough so that the paper sticks out about two inches past each end.

Step 3: Wrap the clay around the middle of the paper, with the clay edges coming together like a seam down the length of the log. Seal this seam of clay by stroking and blending the clay with your thumbs.

Step 4: After smoothing the loose edges, start squeezing the clay in the middle with your hand. This will move the clay to the ends of the paper log. Don't make the log *too* smooth — an irregular surface gives the log more charm.

Step 5: Stroke the clay between your thumb and forefinger to get a thinned edge on each end of the log.

Step 6: Use the comb to create a woodgrain look. Texture the log from end to end, and all the way around.

Step 7: Add a smaller branch to give the straight log stability when it sits alone. Make a carrot shaped coil of clay about 7 inches long — wide on one end, pointed at the other. Along with stability, this provides more surface to add flowers and cactus pads.

Step 8: Comb in wood grain to the smaller piece and attach about 5 or 6 inches from one end of the main log. Attaching the smaller piece away from the center to the main log creates a more pleasing shape than attaching it to the middle.

Materials

5 lbs. EM-330 white clay by Laguna Clay
K45 Klay Gun mini extruder by Kemper
Clay Lift Tool
Airbrush by Paasche
Sponge
Turntable

Colors by Duncan

E-Z Strokes:

EZ 007 Royal Purple
EZ 008 Ruby Red
EZ 010 French Brown
EZ 025 Lemon Yellow
EZ 028 Leaf Green
EZ 032 Peacock Green
Envision IN 1001 Clear glaze

Brushes & Tools by Duncan

BR 551 #3 round opaque
BR 552 #5 round opaque
BR 576 ¾ inch premium glaze
BR 585 #6 Sabelina
TL 401 cleanup tool

Tools by Colorific Porcelain

Rex Tools #17 rose cutters (set of 4)
Rex Tools #18 rose cutters (set of 3)

Miscellaneous

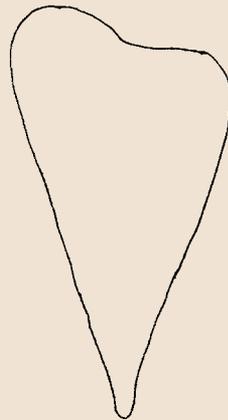
Newspaper
Water bowl
Plastic covering
Handi Wipes reusable cloths
Plastic comb cut to 1 inch
1 Tbs. vinegar
Rolling pin
14 inch x 6 inch paper-covered board





Cutter Shape Guide

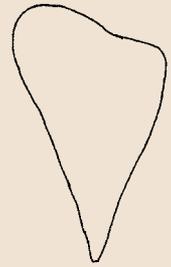
#18 Rose Cutters (Set of 3)



Large Cactus
Pads- (Cut 4)



Medium Cactus
Pads- (Cut 4)

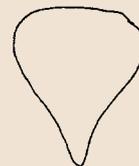


Small Cactus
Pads- (Cut 6)

#17 Rose Cutters (Set of 4 - Use the largest)



Extra-small Cactus
Pads- (Cut 4)



Flowers & Buds-
(Cut 49)

Use your finger to blend the thick end of the small branch to the main log. Blend the top, front and bottom, but leave the side next to the main log untouched. This will give any air that may be trapped between the two pieces of clay a way of escaping during firing.

Step 9: Twist the small branch to give it a pleasing look, and comb in wood grain texture over the smoothed area.

Step 10: Repeat Steps 7 through 9 to add another small branch that points in the opposite direction. This will give the piece height. This branch may need to be propped up as it dries. A full glaze jar works well. The prop can be removed when the branch is firm enough to stand on its own.

Step 11: When your log looks good to you, set it aside and cover it with plastic. Clean your work area so there are no crumbs on top or under the newspaper.

Rose Cutter Preparation

Step 12: Reshape all three #18 Rose Cutters and the largest #17 to make cactus pads by bending the loop up on one side and making a dip in the center (see diagram).

Step 13: Reshape the second largest #17 Rose Cutter to make the cactus petals and buds by bending both sides of the loop outward to make the top of the petal somewhat flat (see diagram).

Cactus

Note: Use the smooth sides of the Rose Cutters to cut the cactus pads, flower petals, and buds.

Step 14: Use the rolling pin to roll out a slab of clay about 1/8 inch thick. Turn the slab over often as you roll out the clay. If you forget to do this, the clay will become stuck to the newspaper and tear when you try to loosen it.

Step 15: Use the appropriate size Rose Cutter as described earlier to cut out two pieces of clay for each cactus pad. There will be two large cactus pads (four clay pieces), two medium, three small, and two extra small.

As you cut the clay, lay the pieces between damp pieces of Handi Wipes. If you do not, the pieces will be too dry when it is time to work with them. If the Handi Wipes become too dry, do not spritz them with water; the droplets will cause the clay to become mushy and unable to hold its shape. Instead, dip the top cloth back into water, wring out the excess, and return the cloth to the clay.

Step 16: Fashion each cactus pad by making a small “pillow” of wadded newspaper that is slightly smaller than the clay piece. Lay the paper between the two cut pieces of cactus. Smooth and blend the edges all around the cactus pad. If you need to use water, do so very sparingly. Too much water will make it difficult to cut in the cactus needles in the next step.

Step 17: Cut thin “V” shapes into the pads with a clay lift tool. Bend each “V” slightly so they stand out, making the cactus needles.

Step 18: Create air vents in each cactus pad by making sure one of the “V” cuts goes through to the paper stuffing.

Step 19: Set the finished cactus pads aside and cover them with plastic to keep the clay moist.



Flowers

Step 20: Roll out another 1/8 inch slab of clay. Use the Rose Cutter fashioned to the petal shape to cut out two eight-petal flowers and one five-petal flower. Use the same petal shape for different sized flower buds. Cut four three-petal buds, five two-petal buds and six one-petal buds — the number of buds may vary but this will give you a good start. Altogether, that’s 49 petal shapes total. Be sure to keep the flower pieces covered with a damp cloth.

Step 21: Ruffle the edge of each petal by stroking the clay between your thumb and forefinger. Move your forefinger down while you push the clay up with your thumb. This technique takes a bit of practice, so you may find it helpful to use a scrap strip of clay to practice the movement. If this seems too difficult, you can achieve a similar look by crimping the edges of the petals the same way you would crimp the edge of a pie. However, it is worth the time to master the more difficult movement.

Step 22: Cup the center of the petal by placing the petal in the palm of one hand and stroking the center lightly with a finger from your other hand. After you shape each petal, cover it again with a damp cloth.

Step 23: Create the center of each flower with the Klay Gun. Use the middle-size screen to push out three clusters of tiny coils about 1 ½ inches long.

Step 24: Press the base of each coil cluster together to create a stem. Leave the top loose and roll the bottom between your thumb and forefinger.

Step 25: Create the center of the smallest flower by arranging five petals around the loose cluster top. Hold the cluster in one hand and pick up one petal at a time. Crease each petal at the base and press it firmly to the stem of the cluster top that fits into the cupped part of the petal.

Step 26: Turn the flower upside down in the palm of your hand and cut off the excess clay at the bottom of the flower. The cut is made at the bottom of the cupped area, so the stem is removed completely.

If you have pressed the petals together firmly enough, there will be no cracks or gaps showing on the cut area. A flower that is put together loosely will fall apart. Petals that are too dry will not stick and will crack.

Step 27: The buds are prepared in the same manner, but without creasing the bottom of the petal. Overlap three petals together like a fan. Roll them together, jelly roll style, and form a stem below the bud. Only use one or two petals for the smaller buds. Do not cut off the excess stem until the buds are ready to be placed in the arrangement. Sometimes a little extra height is needed.

Assembly & Firing

Step 28: Place the log on a newspaper-covered board on top of a turntable. Using a turntable will reduce the stress to your log as you decorate. The newspaper will keep the log from sticking to the board.

Step 29: Add vinegar to some slip and stir it to the consistency of whipped cream. Use the thickened slip to attach the cactus pads to the log.

Cactus grows in clusters, with the larger pads on the bottom and the smaller pads attached to the top edge on either side — not in the center. Don't place the cactus pads too close together. Allow enough space for the flowers.

Step 30: Attach the flowers and buds using thickened slip. All attachment points should be cleaned and smoothed with a damp brush.

Step 31: Sign your work by smoothing a section of the log with the rounded side of a cleanup tool, then write your name and the date with the curved tip of the tool.

Step 32: Allow the piece to dry completely on the board.

It takes about four days in dry climates and up to a week in areas with more humidity. When it's dry, use a damp, stiff bristle brush to remove loose crumbs and clean all edges.

Step 33: Test for air pockets in the piece by placing it in an oven at 350 degrees F for one hour. If there is air trapped in the clay, it will pop in the oven instead of exploding in the kiln where it could damage the kiln and other pieces.

Step 34: Fire the piece to cone 04.

Finishing

Stains will give a very attractive finish to the piece. However, one-strokes with a glaze over the top will add more strength.

The log is the only section that has color applied with a brush.

All other colors are applied with an airbrush. Place a small piece of newspaper beneath each airbrushed area to block over-spray.

Step 35: Use a #6 round sable brush to apply a thin wash of French Brown to the log.

Step 36: Airbrush Lemon Yellow to the centers of the flowers.

Step 37: Airbrush the flowers with Ruby Red.

Step 38: Base coat the cactus pads by airbrushing with Peacock Green.

Step 39: Shade the cactus pads with Leaf Green and Royal Purple. Let the colors dry completely.

Step 40: Fire the piece to cone 06.

Note: This firing is only a precaution to prevent colors from moving when Clear glaze is applied. For convenience, you can usually fire your piece to the temperature of a current low-fire load.

Step 41: Use a glaze brush to coat the entire piece with Clear glaze. Let the glaze dry completely.

Step 42: Fire the piece to cone 06.

Advanced Methods

Experiment with different bases or formations for your prickly pear cactus, or look at other forms of flowering cactus to add to your desert display.

Sources

Colorific Porcelain: www.colorificporcelain.com

Duncan: www.ilovetocreate.com

Kemper Tools: <http://kempertools.com>

Laguna Clay: www.lagunaclay.com

