

# HOME & GARDEN



**Material World**  
Concrete shows its creative side on countertops. **4**

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THE CHRONICLE  
GARDEN *Jane Tunks*

## Restoring the garden starts with the soil

Garden soil may look like just a pile of dirt, but it's actually a mini-ecosystem with organic matter such as microscopic bacteria, worms, insects and other creepy-crawly critters — all of which work together to give a plant everything it needs to thrive. Just as a mother gives life to a baby, the earth gives life to plants.

At least, that's what permaculture experts Fred Bove and Kevin Bayuk told me.

And I thought it was just dirt. Though the hardy plants in The Chronicle's rooftop garden have survived the last year on not much more than water and sunlight, a few of them look as if they might be more at home in the seedy alleys surrounding the SoMa building.

Bayuk and Bove blamed much of the plants' predicament on the poor condition of the dirt. To create a



### Advice from Danielle Hirsch

**Color makes a greater impact** when it flows naturally from room to room. You can achieve this by keeping the trim or floor the same color throughout the house.

**Lighter, less saturated colors** will make a room feel airier. Deeper, more intense colors will pull the walls in around you, making a room feel cozier.

**Color doesn't have to leap out** at you to have an impact. Combining neutrals with different textures can be visually stimulating.

**A safe way to pick a ceiling color** is to choose a lighter version of the wall color. If the ceiling is more than 8 feet high, consider painting it darker.



# Affordable alternative to stone

By **Zahid Sardar**  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Artist and designer Fu-Tung Cheng has lived in the Bay Area since 1978, when he bought a 1,200-square-foot home in Albany. He embarked almost immediately on a remodeling project that led to the construction of his first experimental kitchen counter — a disaster.

"I had more time than money," he said. He knew nothing of molding forms and little of the alchemy of concrete and its near-magical properties: It solidifies within hours but continues to harden as it ages over 100 years. But he knew he could afford it.



Photos courtesy Taunton Press

**Fu-Tung Cheng prepares a form for a concrete counter.**

It's relatively inexpensive — six \$6 sacks of Quikcrete or Sakrete concrete and water

can make about a 3-by-8-foot kitchen counter. Concrete is mostly rock, sand and a little cement, which is high-fired crystallized lime that hardens when water is added. You can add colors to it when it is wet, or stain it later.

Cheng still lives in the same home and is now the author of three show-and-tell books from Taunton Press on the subject of pouring concrete counters. His latest, "Concrete Countertops Made Simple," is both a book and a 25-minute DVD for \$21.95.

When Cheng started, he could have used a teacher like himself to understand just how easy yet complex it would be.



**A stylish wedge-shaped concrete counter by Fu-Tung Cheng that also saves space in a small powder room.**

"Hand troweling a smooth finish is virtually impossible," says the veteran of countless concrete counters. Pouring concrete into a smooth upside-down mold made of cheap

laminated plywood, he discovered, was the way to go. The top would be nearly flawlessly smooth. Judging by his week-end seminars on the subject, which at \$500 a person are always filled to capacity (Cheng's Web site lists hundreds of concrete contractors he has trained), it is a craft many might try at home in belt-tightening times.

"One of the things I like about concrete for counters is that it ties into the idea of a 'locally grown' material," Cheng said. "While the production of concrete is energy consuming it is also heavy to transport, so it is almost always made locally and sent over very short distances. It is often composed of gravel in local quarries."

"Compare that to stone from India, Brazil and China, and concrete's carbon footprint looks very good," Cheng said.

And concrete lasts as long as stone, he said. Three decades later, "I still have the same counters, and people still go 'wow!'"

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## At a glance

**The expert opinion:** Three cubic feet of concrete are made with a gallon of water. When it gets runny, like oatmeal, it is time to pour it into a mold. A fully polished, integrally colored concrete counter will have to be sealed, especially in the kitchen and bathroom. Good sealers will cost about \$20 a pint and they have to be poured liberally until they saturate the well-cured counter before being wiped off. Food-grade wax adds a nice sheen and another layer of protection.

**Cons:** There is no bulletproof sealer. If a kitchen counter gets etched by acids from food, fruit, wine or vinegar — and it will, says Cheng — you can gently polish off the etched area and reseal and wax. It's a nuisance but it is just like taking care of a good hardwood floor.

If the concrete is not cured properly it can develop hairline cracks, which can be filled with epoxy. If the form is handled too soon after a pour, if there is too much water or if the foam form for a sinkhole is placed too close to the counter edge, it will develop more serious cracks. You will have to start over. Cheng also discourages making concrete counters with an integral sink because water will quickly pit and erode it. "You don't want it for a primary sink. In a powder room where it gets little use, it's fine," he says.

**Costs:** For do-it-yourselfers with a rented mixer, vibrator (to push out bubbles) and a polisher with about three diamond pads that cost about \$20, a concrete kitchen counter can cost as little as \$8 per square foot, installed.

**Where to find it:** For Fu-Tung Cheng's online resource guide, Web store for making countertops, and for the Cheng Concrete Training Academy, go to [www.chengconcrete.com](http://www.chengconcrete.com). (510) 849-3272, Ext. 217.