

# Los Angeles Times

## The terrarium is back, revived for a new generation

By: Bettijane Levine  
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IS it nature? Or is it art? Painters and poets have long known that the furl of a fern or an orchid's architecture can qualify as both. Now a growing wave of indoor gardeners is capturing nature in miniature and under glass. Yes, terrariums are back. But they can be a far cry from the clumsy gardens grown in jelly jars, vodka bottles and fish tanks in the '70s. Back then they were a fad, like lava lamps and macrame -- and results could get pretty ugly. Today's devotees of the trend see new possibilities in creative horticulture and home decor.

High priestess of the movement is artist Paula Hayes, a New York sculptor, painter and landscape designer who has plumbed the concept of plants as portable artworks that require human interaction to survive. Hayes designs delicate, handblown glass terrariums in organic shapes that call to mind bubbles, teardrops, body parts, peanuts, pears -- all with ineffably elegant tiny gardens inside.

She coddles each for about a year until plants are established and the work is ready for sale -- for about \$8,000 to \$22,000. New York art critics and collectors have taken to her work, creating buzz that has traveled far beyond their ZIP Codes. The terrariums themselves are too fragile to ship. "They can't be tipped or jiggled," Hayes says. "Two clients flew from Aspen and carried their terrariums home on their laps. I'm waiting for two San Francisco clients to do the same."

Her concept of terrariums as art has grown via the Internet in the last couple of years, she says.

"Design bloggers picked up on it and spread the word. It's viral and seems to have touched a nerve," perhaps because it's a populist art form that anyone can try.

"People look at my website [ [www.paulahayes.com](http://www.paulahayes.com)] and at the huge cost of my work, and they decide to make their own," she says, sounding pleased. "What's magical is how you plant it, how you must always attend to it and never abandon it. It's the same as having a garden."

NOELLE SMITH, spokeswoman for Smith & Hawken garden shops, says indoor gardening has taken off in the last year or two.

"Anything that creates its own biosphere -- either terrariums or cloches (bell-shaped glass domes that sit on saucers) -- is selling well," she says. "We went from two or three styles to nine of them," she says, and sales have increased about 30% in two years.

For loft and apartment dwellers, the idea of a small indoor garden on a desk or coffee table is especially appealing. Terrariums (or any clear glass containers that can double as one) have begun showing up online and in home furnishings catalogs, as well as in garden supply stores. (See accompanying story.)

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Terrariums were invented by Nathaniel Ward, an English physician and botanist who placed a cocoon in a closed jar for observation and soon noticed ferns growing in dirt at the jar's bottom. They continued to grow and thrive in the protected, humid environment, although they died when he tried to grow them outdoors in London's polluted air. Ward concluded that many plants that could not survive in the outdoor climate and air conditions could live quite healthily in the biospheres he built and called ferneries, one of which has been preserved by the Smithsonian Institution.

The doctor's discovery led to a new horticultural era. Rare plants could be transported across continents and climate zones in what became known as Wardian cases, and wealthy British families started commissioning elaborate versions for their living rooms. The word "terrarium," from the Latin "terra," meaning "earth," is commonly used in the U.S.

As with any fashionable trend, many who catch the zeitgeist have probably never heard of its creator.

Mykel Newton, 29, of Fresno, has a hospital day job and also designs flowers for special events. She got the yen for terrariums after listening to her grandmother, a retired florist, reminisce about them.

"We wanted to refresh the idea, do something more modern," Newton says. They planted a test batch of 20 and took them to a local garden show.

"We sold out fast and took so many orders that I didn't have enough containers to fill them," Newton says.

She bought a stock of apothecary jars at gift shows and has been filling orders for two basic styles -- tropical or country garden -- ever since. Many customers are men looking for gifts or something decorative for their offices, she says.

James McKinney collects antique terrariums and for 50 years has owned a Wichita, Kan., greenhouse specializing in exotic tropical plants -- and terrariums in which to grow them.

Most prized by his customers have been the Victorian styles modeled after originals of that era. So he was surprised to get a recent call from a St. Louis woman who wanted what she described as "a beautiful modern glass bubble." McKinney's usual suppliers had nothing to fill the bill. But at T.J. Maxx, he found a Portuguese-made, handblown glass sphere with a domed lid that he planted with tropical blooms.

"My customer was so excited that she drove 500 miles to come and get it," he says. Two weeks later, a Philadelphia woman phoned asking him to create "something modern," he says. "We selected a simple 16-inch glass cube from a local glassblower, planted it and shipped it. I guess there maybe is some kind of trend going on."

THE Internet offers copious information on how to plant and care for terrariums. McKinney starts with a layer of small sterilized pebbles, a thin coating of horticultural charcoal above that, and then a layer of sterilized potting mix. He plants small specimens of gesneriads (the family that includes African violets), begonias, ferns, small mosses and moss-like plants (including the Selaginella genus) and diminutive creeping ficus. He moistens with sterilized water.

"You don't need to water often," he says, "and never overwater, because there's no drainage. Wait until there's no condensation on the inside of the glass, then lightly mist or drip some water in." Hayes uses a baster.

Los Angeles floral designer Krislyn Komarov says terrariums have never really gone away. "We're doing revised versions of what we did 10 years ago," she says. "People always crave conversation pieces, unique containers with a spectacular arrangements inside. I use little desert plants, air plants, scotch moss, baby tears,

# CRISTINA GRAJALES GALLERY

occasionally a small specimen orchid. And I try to tell a little story inside of each.”

There are those who can't grow anything indoors, no matter how they try. Cathryn Barmon, a graphic designer, lives in a tiny New York apartment with her husband and yearned “for something serene, something alive that spoke of nature.” She tried a terrarium, a little bonsai tree, a little moss garden. “Everything died, no matter what I did.” she says.

Now Barmon has a small side business selling dioramas that look like living landscapes but are totally artificial. The one that hangs on a blank wall in her apartment “fools my eye into thinking I have a window onto nature.” For her, she says, that's enough.

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Mini plants, major care

ARTIST Paula Hayes has been spotted tending her tiny terrarium plants with heart surgeon's tweezers and surgical scissors. James McKinney has used those implements too, but the Kansas terrarium specialist and exotic-plant expert says the best tools he's found are from his kitchen drawer.

“For large, deep bottle terrariums with small necks, I use a wine cork glued to one end of a dowel and a variety of knives, forks and spoons, which I tape securely to the other end,” he says.

Wooden dowels from the lumberyard are inexpensive; they can be as skinny as a pencil and any length you need. He uses the cork end to depress earth and make holes for planting, among other things. He drops plants through the neck and manipulates them into place with his homemade tools.

“I use teaspoons, tablespoons, whatever looks right for the job,” he says. He uses a fork to push soil up around the roots, he says, describing a kind of Lilliputian rake.

For open-top terrariums, his tool supply source is the same. “I use silver knives, forks and spoons of various sizes,” he says. “My favorite scoop for potting soil is the kitchen scoop we bought for flour.”

For the container, McKinney has used pieces as simple as a lidded glass vessel from T.J. Maxx, but options abound. Go to [www.smithandhawken.com](http://www.smithandhawken.com), and you'll find a selection of terrariums, including a conservatory-shaped glass and metal model, above, on sale for \$79 and a bell-shaped glass cloche on sale for \$55. Rolling Greens in Culver City creates terrariums in apothecary jars. Neiman Marcus' Wardian case (\$629) is a 5-foot-4-inch-tall piece described as similar to those used in “stylish drawing rooms in the Victorian era, giving exotic plants such as ferns and orchids a chance to thrive.”