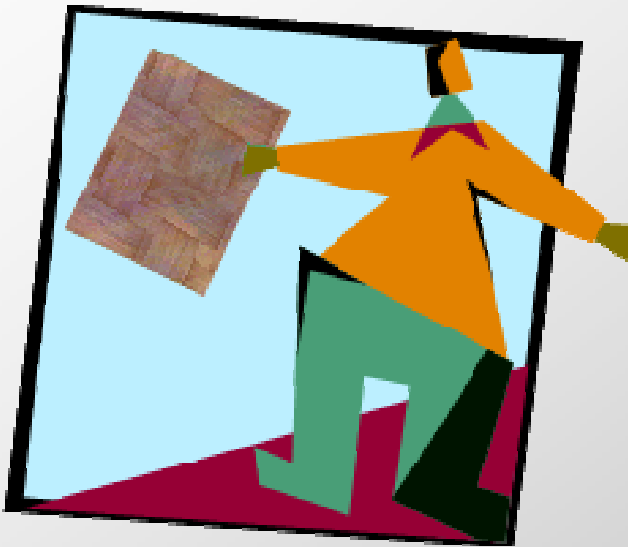




Guide to Buying Stamps and Skins

By Anne Balogh, The Concrete Network



Stamped concrete is more popular today than ever before, even though the technique originated on the West Coast way back in the 1950s. Why is decorative stamping now all the rage? One of the main reasons is the availability of better stamping tools that produce such realistic results that many people can't tell the difference between stamped concrete and pricier paving materials such as natural stone, slate, or brick. [Continue >](#)



If you were to page through a history book of decorative concrete, you'd probably come across old photos of the first tools for stamping concrete. They were made from cast aluminum and resembled giant cookie cutters with handles attached. Although these early tools worked great at imprinting basic brick or stone patterns in fresh concrete, they didn't impart any texture so the results looked unrealistic in comparison with what you can achieve today. Now, most stamping tools are made of a durable polyurethane and molded from the real materials they mimic, resulting in stunningly authentic textural effects.

As the appetite for decorative stamped concrete continues to grow, stamp suppliers are serving up an ever-expanding smorgasbord of stamping tools and patterns to choose from. Some companies carry hundreds of standard and custom patterns, ranging from slate, to brick, to cobblestone, to botanical and wildlife themes. But buying a stamp involves much more than just picking out an appealing pattern. You also need to choose the right type of stamp for the job and know what characteristics distinguish a high-quality stamp from a substandard version.

To help you make a smart choice, here's a list of shopping tips compiled with the assistance of three decorative concrete pros: Bob Harris, president of the Decorative Concrete Institute and author of *Bob Harris' Guide to Stamped Concrete*, Chris Sullivan, national technical director and regional sales manager for QC Construction Products, and Clark Branum, Northwest territory manager for Brickform Rafco.



[Decorative Concrete Institute](#)



1. Match the Stamp Type with the Application

There are the three basic types of stamping tools for concrete flatwork. Each serves a different purpose, and for most jobs you'll need more than one type.

Rigid and semi-rigid mats

These are the sturdiest of the mat types and are firm enough to stand on. They also have handles for easy lifting and moving. The primary difference between the two is the hardness of the polyurethane used. The rigid mat is the firmest type and has zero flex. The semi-rigid mat has a slight degree of flex, permitting it to conform to contours in the concrete.



[Cadillac Concrete Products.](#)

Applications: Generally, you'll use a rigid mat to imprint the majority of the stamping job because it will leave the best impression, especially with deeper patterns. However, some contractors prefer to use a semi-rigid mat because they can feel the underlying contour of the concrete better, says Harris. He also notes that the more flexible semi-rigid mat works well where there are undulations in the slab, such as on sloped areas or on driveway aprons where the ends flare up slightly.

Flex mats (or floppies)

The floppy is about half the thickness of a rigid mat and made with a more pliable urethane, so you can bend the mat to a 90-degree angle to conform to slab edges or walls.



Applications: Floppy mats have no handles and aren't rigid enough to stand on, so their primary purpose is to work along edges, in confined areas such as corners, and up against walls, stairs, and columns. Floppies are typically available in the same patterns as the rigid mats so they are ideal for filling in areas where the mats can't work, minimizing final touch-up.

Texturing skins

Skins are ultra-thin and pliable, with feathered edges that overlap so they produce seamless texture without any grout lines. Like mats, they come in a variety of textured patterns, but the depth of detail is less pronounced.

Applications: On many projects, you'll need to use both mats and texturing skins. The skins are ideal for impressing texture along the slab edges. This is important because when you're working with a nonflexible stamp, the tool will overlap the edge of the form and you won't be able to fully depress it into the concrete. Skins are also handy for texturing vertical faces, such as stair risers.



[Proline Concrete Tools](#)

If you're after a completely seamless look, you can even use skins in lieu of mats for the entire concrete surface. For contractors new to stamping, skins can be the easiest method of creating texture because you don't have to worry about pattern alignment.

Another application for skins is to fix blemishes from non uniform stamping. "For touching up or fixing minor surface flaws, a texture skin can be your biggest ally," says Harris. "It can be used as an eraser to correct unevenness or non uniformity."



2. Know How Many Mats You'll Need for the Job

Your window of opportunity for stamping is limited, especially in warmer weather when the concrete sets more quickly or when you're stamping a thin overlay. That makes it essential to have enough stamps (and workers) to complete the job without interruption.

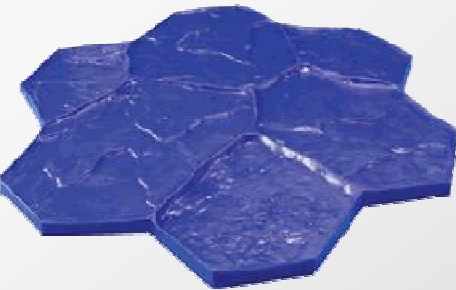
The general rule is to have enough mats on hand to extend across the full width of the area to be stamped plus a couple of additional mats to start the next row. You will also need at least one floppy or texture skin and a tamper to impress the mats into the fresh concrete. Some small jobs, such as a walkway or patio, may only require a few stamps. Commercial projects may require 20 or more stamps so crews can work on several rows at a time.

To accurately figure out how many stamps to purchase, you need to know the dimensions of the tool of choice, says Harris. For example, if you plan to purchase 24x24-inch stamping mats for a residential driveway 20 feet wide, you would need 10 mats to span the 20-foot width, plus two additional tools.

3. Measure Profile Depth Before Stamping an Overlay

Most of the same stamps and skins used for freshly placed concrete can also be used to add pattern and texture to cement-based overlays. However, be careful not to purchase stamping mats with deep profiles that will exceed the overlay thickness.

Stamped overlays are typically applied at a thickness of 1/4 to 3/4 inch. As a general rule, the topping should be twice the thickness of the deepest pattern indent on the stamping mat. For example, if you plan to apply the overlay at a 1/2-inch thickness, don't buy a tool with an indent deeper than 1/4-inch. Generally, pattern depth won't be a problem with the thinner texturing skins.



[Brickform Rafco Products](#)





4. Go for Color Coding

Usually stamps are sold in sets consisting of several mats that give slightly different impressions of the same pattern. The reason is to avoid pattern repetition and produce a random look that's more realistic. To help you differentiate the pattern variations when using the stamps, manufacturers will code their tools by using letters (such as A, B, C), numbers, or different colors. Harris prefers color coding because the system makes it as mistake-proof as possible to differentiate the patterns in the set. "The goal is not to repeat the pattern. With color coding, it's easy. Just don't place tools of the same color next to each other," he says.



[Decorative Concrete Institute](#)

5. Inspect Tool Quality

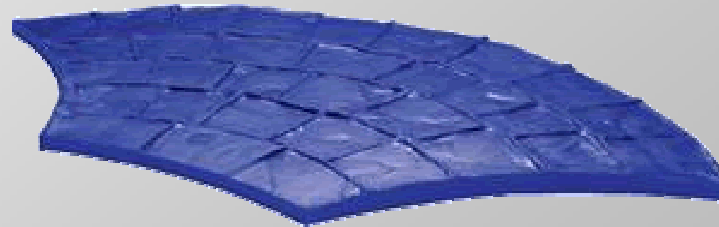
You normally wouldn't buy an indispensable concrete finishing tool, such as a bull float or trowel, without scrutinizing its quality and testing out the grip for comfort. The same holds true for stamping tools. Following are some important characteristics to look for to distinguish a high-quality stamp from an inferior product:

- Do the tools fit together tightly, with no perceptible gaps?
- Is the stamp thickness consistent? You don't want to purchase a stamp that's ½-inch thick on one side and 1 inch thick on the other.
- With rectangular stamps, are edges and corners straight and do the stamps align properly?
- Is any excess plastic hanging from the edges of the stamp?



- Are the handles on the stamp firmly affixed, without protruding through to the bottom of the tool?
- Is the texture crisp and sharp? Does it look realistic?
- Is there enough variation in pattern and texture from tool to tool to ensure a random look?
- Is the price in line with similar products? You get what you pay for, so avoid bargain-basement deals.

According to Sullivan, the No. 1 sign of poor quality is "out of true" tools. When stamps are made, the polyurethane needs to cure in the master mold to hold its shape. If removed too early or poured too fast, uneven thickness and shrinkage can occur.



Most stamping tools are made of a durable polyurethane and molded from the real materials they mimic, resulting in stunningly authentic textural effects.

Photo Courtesy of [Brickform Rafco Products](#)



What about buying tools online? Be wary, say our experts. Unless you're familiar with the product or know another contractor who swears by the same brand, you're better off buying from a local distributor who will give you a chance to inspect the tools closely and ask any questions you may have about product quality.

"My preference is to buy through a distributor, which gives you a chance to ask someone about how the tools have been selling and what the feedback is on the product," says Sullivan. "Most distributors also provide samples so you can feel the material and see the texture before buying."



[Brickform Rafco Products](#)

6. Warranty and Reputation Count

In addition to inspecting for quality, check the stamp supplier's tool warranties, replacement policies, and reputation before you give them your business. When cared for properly, a top-quality stamping tool should provide many reuses and years of performance in the field. Some companies stand behind the durability of their products by offering lifetime warranties. Others will replace, at no cost, tools that tear or have obvious defects.

"Most companies offer a limited warranty, but a good company will replace a defective tool at any time, no questions asked. To me, that makes all the difference," says Branum.



7. Consult an Expert

If you're still daunted by the multitude of stamping tools on the market, then get some expert advice. Call several stamp manufacturers and ask them to explain what makes their tools superior to others. Also ask experienced stampers about the tools they prefer to use and why. Doing a bit of homework will ensure that your money is well spent on long-lasting tools that give your stamped concrete convincing detail and texture.



[Cadillac Concrete Products](#)

A final word of advice: Once you take your pristine new stamping tools out of the box, avoid the temptation to use them right away on an important project. Harris recommends experimenting with them first in wet, compacted sand so you can see how the pattern lines up and how much pressure is needed to achieve the desired level of detail. Once you perfect your technique, you'll be ready to use your new tools to transform concrete.



Sherpa info

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This document reached the summit (was created) on December 28, 2005 and is based on the best information available to the Sherpa at that time. To check for updates please click here <http://www.ConcreteSherpa.com/stampsandskins>.

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	PC	MAC
Zoom in (Larger)	[Ctrl] [+]	[⌘] [+]
Zoom out	[Ctrl] [-]	[⌘] [-]
Full screen/normal screen view	[Ctrl] [L]	[⌘] [L]

ABOUT THE CONCRETE SHERPA

The Concrete Sherpa is a team of people that represent the experience, teaching and learning of our team members and other industry leaders *on a mission to make life better for the concrete contractor*. We are an idea center striving to deliver thought provoking ideas based on “Concrete Advice for Business and Life” to stimulate you to reach new heights. As a user, you should remember to consider all information you receive, here at the Concrete Sherpa or elsewhere, not as a *cast in concrete* recommendation, but rather as an idea for you to consider and ponder.



Sherpa info

THE JOURNEY LEADING TO THE CONCRETE SHERPA PROJECT

The Concrete Sherpa Project (A [Sherpa](#) is a “guide”) was born at The Concrete Network in mid 2004. Here is how it happened:

The biggest surprise, or gift, since starting The Concrete Network in 1999 has been the concrete contractor friends from around the country we’ve made and witnessing the passion they have for what they do. These people include Dave Pettigrew, up in the San Francisco Bay Area, or the Verlennich brothers in Minnesota, or Bob Harris in Georgia, the list goes on and on. It’s quite inspiring.

We were once asked, “How are you so excited every day about concrete?” Well the answer is simple, it is impossible to not be excited about concrete when you have the job we do—interacting with hundreds of concrete contractors from every state in the country.

The thing we’ve learned about concrete contractors is that most are passionate *craftsmen*—they are often less passionate and experienced in the “office stuff”. Human nature channels us to do what we are most comfortable with; learning how to use a new saw-cutting tool is comfortable; learning and implementing a new estimating strategy, or job management tool, is not so comfortable.



Sherpa info

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES...

So Sherpa was born to provide FREE and easy to use information on topics many contractors are not too comfortable with.

- Concrete Sherpa is here to provide help to contractors who are often ‘Lone Rangers’ and don’t have anyone to get solid business advice from.
- Concrete Sherpa is here to provide help for contractors who have to work too hard and too many hours in their business, and one day realize they need to work *on their business, not in their business*.
- Have fun with Concrete Sherpa and go faster towards reaching success than you might have on your own.
- To skeptics who think something free can’t be valuable, or there must be a trick- visit Concrete Sherpa and decide for yourself.

We hope you make great use of the Concrete Sherpa and it helps you to become an awesome success for yourself, your family, your church, and your community.

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