

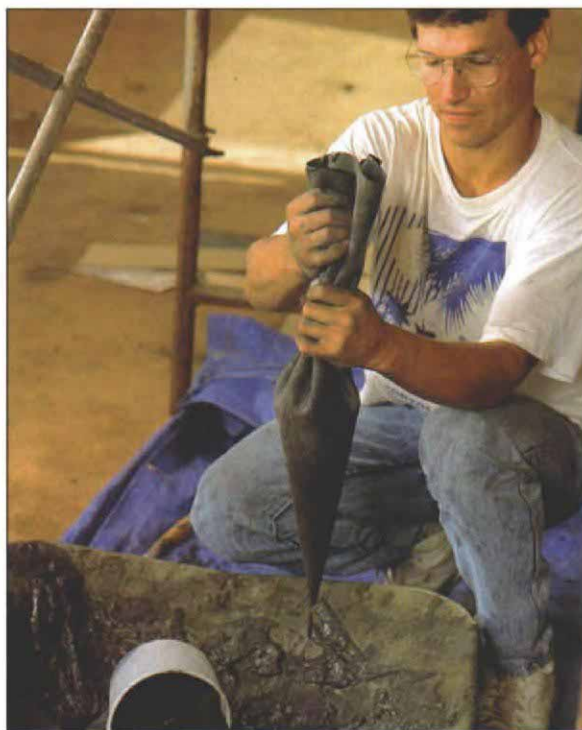
Pointing Stonework

A pastry bag speeds this tedious job and gets the work done cleanly and efficiently

by Christopher Kachur



Filling the mortar bag is messy. Hold the pastry bag upright over the mortar pan so that any mortar that drips down will fall back into the pan. Use any type of heavy-duty plastic container to lift the mortar out of the pan and pour it into the bag. Fill the bag only a little more than halfway.



Get a feel for how the mortar will flow. Get a good grip on the open end of the mortar-filled bag, and twist it to create pressure on the narrow end; test it first by squeezing some mortar back into the pan to get a feel for how the mortar flows and how much pressure is needed to get the job done.

Whether you're a veteran stonemason or a motivated novice, pointing stonework with a trowel and pointer can be time-consuming, messy and tedious. But you can speed the process and get good results and a neat job by using a pastry bag instead of a trowel.

I used to point my stonework at the end of each day. However, many variables can affect the color of the mortar when you mix it and point on a day-to-day basis. Pointing a bit at a time using a trowel means mixing many different batches of mortar, each of which can have a color that's a little off from the others. These inconsistencies detract from the ultimate appearance of the stonework.

Pointing with a pastry bag makes the work go much faster. When I use a bag, I mix fewer batches of mortar, so the color of the mortar remains relatively consistent.

Using a pastry bag is cost-effective—You can buy a pastry bag, or grout bag, in most masonry-supply stores and in some building-supply stores. The pastry bag is inexpensive (mine cost about \$4), but the best thing about using it to fill in joints is that the bag saves a lot of time.

There are other benefits. When you point at the end of a job, you have the option of picking out the mortar color after you see all the stone laid up. My customers enjoy this option because they can change the color they want right up until the day of pointing. If I'm pointing each day with a trowel, the mortar color for the job is set in stone.

The pastry-bag method is economical. Unlike pointing by hand, using the bag results in little waste and less cleanup. Mortar mix delivered through a bag forms a smooth, hard finish, creating a better seal. This is important if the stone is exposed to weather.

Clean stonework is easier to point—The day before I point, I wash the stonework with water and a hard-bristle brush. I take care to rid the joints of any dirt, loose cement or chinks. I also fill any large voids when the stone is dry.

If the joints run consistently 1 in. or larger, I cut a little off the tip of the bag to allow more mortar to flow out, just as I would with a tube of caulk. I don't use a pastry bag if the average size of the joints is wider than 1½ in.

Mortar should be as thick as pancake batter—Chunks in the mortar can clog the pastry bag, so make sure that the mortar mixer (or the tub and tools if you're mixing by hand) is clean. The sand used should be clean, too. If necessary, I sift sand through wire lath to filter larger pieces.

To make it easier for the mortar to flow through the bag properly, I use a rich mix, usually two

parts sand to one part cement. Begin with a good dry mix and add color if desired. Then add water slowly until the mix has the consistency of pancake batter. It's a good idea to use rubber gloves to keep your hands from getting stained with mortar color. Also, the lime in the cement burns.

Load the bag and test the pressure you'll need to apply—To fill the bag, hold it upright over the mortar pan so that any spills fall back into the pan. Use any type of sturdy plastic container to scoop out mortar, and fill the bag a little more than halfway (left photo, facing page). If the mix is wet enough, the mortar should drop slowly out of the bag as you fill it.

After you load the bag, twist the open end of it and hold it with one hand to create adequate pressure. Hold the narrow end of the bag up with the other hand to prevent mortar from flowing out until you're ready. Test the bag by squeezing some mortar back into the mortar pan (right photo, facing page). Get the feel of how the mortar flows and how much pressure to apply.

Use the bag like a big, two-handed caulking gun. Run the tip of the bag along the inside of the joints, keeping constant pressure by continuously twisting the open end of the bag and squeezing it in the middle (photo top right).

Shiny mortar is too wet—Occasionally as you fill the joints, go back to the starting point and touch the mortar lightly with your finger. When it feels firm like putty, it's ready to point.

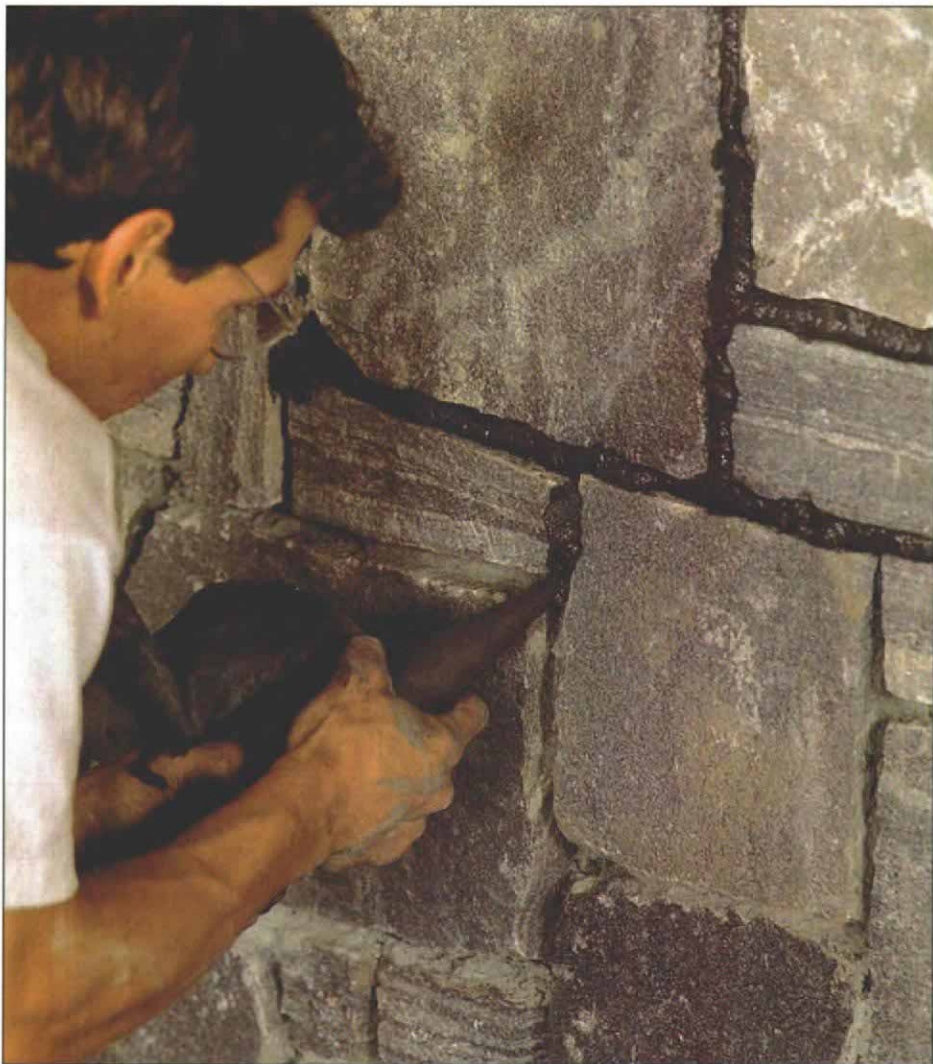
Using a pointing trowel with a $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. to $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. blade is preferable. The larger the average joint, the larger the blade should be. I use the trowel to smooth the mortar to the desired look. I prefer a slightly recessed joint, so while I'm smoothing the mortar, I take the tip of the pointer and scrape it along the inside edge of the stones to reveal their shape better (photo bottom right). If the mortar in the joints starts to shine while you are pointing, you should stop because the mortar is still too wet. Remix the mortar occasionally in the pan while pointing. It also helps to rinse the pastry bag with water before reusing it to prevent any remaining mortar from hardening inside.

When you finish pointing, you can use a brush to sweep the joints clean of loose cement. I use a paintbrush when I don't want to change the look of the joints and a hard-bristle brush when I want a rougher look.

The last step is to brush down the stonework with water. You can do this whenever the mortar is hard, but I usually wait until the next day. Washing the stonework not only cleans excess dust and dirt from the stones but also causes the mortar to cure more slowly. The longer mortar takes to cure, the harder it gets. Stained stone can be cleaned with diluted muriatic acid.

The pastry bag can be used to repoint old brickwork or to grout brick and stone patios. However it is used, the pastry bag will expedite the filling of joints, and the finished product will be one of beauty, consistency and durability. □

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Think of the bag as a two-handed caulking gun. With one hand holding the wide end of the bag tightly closed, apply pressure on the mortar and guide the tip with the other hand. Run the tip of the bag along the inside of the joints. Be sure to keep twisting the large end of the bag with one hand and squeezing it in the middle with your other hand.



Smooth the mortar to get the look you want. After filling the joint with mortar, smooth over it with a pointing trowel to get the joint to the desired smoothness. For a slightly recessed joint that reveals the shape of the stones better, scrape the tip of the pointer along the inside edge of the stones.