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EARTH: Do-It-Yourself Lava Flows

Alexandria, VA – It's not every day that lava flows through a college campus parking lot. But, since January 2010, Syracuse University has been bringing the lava to Central New York. Using commercially available basalt gravel and a coke-fired furnace, the geologists involved with the Syracuse University Lava Project are able to produce a wide range of flow morphologies and other features at a scale comparable to natural flows.

Although one of the most common and voluminous types of lava flows, basaltic lava is still not completely understood. The majority of basaltic eruptions occur out of sight along mid-ocean ridge systems, making them difficult to observe in person. The Syracuse University Lava Project has transformed these typically dangerous and unpredictable events into controlled learning exercises where variables such as composition, temperature, flow rate and slope can be adjusted depending on the experiment. The project, the brainchild of a geologist and an artist, was originally designed to investigate the physical and aesthetic properties of lava as well as to create educational opportunities. The program has since expanded to involve the greater community.

Find out how this remarkable project is providing data for cutting-edge research and attracting public attention online at http://www.earthmagazine.org/article/do-it-yourself-lava-flows.

Read this story and more all in the September issue of EARTH Magazine. Discover how short supervolcanoes' fuses really are; learn how superwinds blow star stuff into space; and unlock the mystery of Ireland's boulders all in this month's issue of EARTH.

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