



## Gingerbread Construction Tips

A compilation of info from past workshops  
Provided by veteran bakers, E. J. McIntyre and Sara Aicher



### 1. Concept and Inspiration

Pick something you love... maybe a local landmark, a scene from a movie, a storybook cottage or castle, a favorite poster, cartoon or grand master, pets, hobbies, nature, games or toys.

There are also many traditional gingerbread house patterns or templates on the internet (some are free and some are for sale).

Here are two favorite sites for inspiration:

[www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)

[www.gingerbread-house-heaven.com](http://www.gingerbread-house-heaven.com)

### 2. Determine the scale

Now that you have your idea, you need to determine the scale of your creation.

Your entire display's width must be no smaller than 1 X 1 foot and no larger than 2.5 X 3 feet.

Although there are no height restrictions, don't forget to consider your doorframe or car capacity.

Remember to leave enough room around your main structure for small details which will make it even more interesting. For example, if you're building a house, do you want to add trees, shrubs, a fence, a sidewalk, a road?

If you are replicating an existing or historic structure, there may be pictures of it on the internet.

You can then enlarge them to the size you need and print them out.

Most builders find that making a cardboard replica helps determine the correct scale and can be used as the pattern when you are ready to cut the gingerbread dough before baking.

### 3. Gingerbread Base

Okay, so now that you know the size of your entire creation, it's time for the base. It must be STURDY! It should not bend or flex. Plywood can be purchased in many shapes and sizes from hardware stores.

Remember to attach short wood strips to the bottom of the board to give it just enough clearance for your fingers to get under to lift and move your piece.

My husband would want me to add that now is the time to think about lighting or any electronics to be added. You may also want to varnish, paint, stain, or decorate the base.

I also find it helpful to draw a chalk outline of all the elements I plan to place on the base. Things can go awry when you try to wing the layout of your display.

#### 4. Recipe

On to my personal nemesis.... making the actual gingerbread. Yuk. I have used several recipes, but every builder has their own favorite. So read a few articles on the internet and look for words like "construction grade" and "good for high humidity". I'm including the one I use which is found on the following site: [www.makeitsweet.com/documents/Gingerbreadrecipeshet.pdf](http://www.makeitsweet.com/documents/Gingerbreadrecipeshet.pdf)  
This makes a lot of dough. If your project is small, cut the recipe in half.

#### **Bromwin Webber's Gingerbread Recipe:**

Sift flour, set aside: 12 cups pastry flour

Combine spices, set aside: 2 Tbsp. ground Ginger, 2 Tbsp. ground Cinnamon, 2 Tbsp. ground Cloves, 2 tsp. ground Nutmeg, 1 tsp. Salt (Do not add spices if you want a light colored dough)

Combine in another bowl. Set aside: 2/3 cups Lemon Juice , 2 Eggs beaten, 2 Egg Yolks beaten

Melt over medium heat: 1/2 cup Butter, 1 1/3 cups Honey, 3 1/3 cups Sugar  
(Do not use cheap honey that has water added to it.)

Stir until butter and honey are melted and then add sugar.

Continue to combine - the sugar does not need to dissolve. Remove from heat.

While butter/honey/sugar mixture is still warm, place in mixer bowl, add lemon juice/egg mixture. Mix until well blended using paddle attachment. Slowly add the flour and spice mixtures. Dough will be sticky at first, and then becomes very stiff as you continue adding the flours. Knead the dough until it makes a smooth ball.

At this point you could add food color. This works well if you need a darker color.

Keep the finished dough at room temperature, covered with plastic wrap.

The dough is very difficult to roll if it becomes cool/cold.

If the dough cools down, you can wrap it in plastic wrap and microwave 15 - 30 seconds at a time. This re-heats the honey slightly and makes it easier to handle.

**DO NOT REFRIGERATE THIS DOUGH.** It is tough and dense so must be warm to knead and roll. Your hands and arms will thank you.

## 5. Cutting, Shaping, Baking

Lightly wipe the counter with water then spread a sheet of aluminum foil down (the water keeps the foil from moving). Use a rolling pin with rings so that the dough is all the same thickness. Dust the rolling surface and rolling pin with flour. Roll dough directly on foil - this prevents the pieces from becoming misshapen as they are being moved to the baking sheet.- place on baking pan and cut pieces.

(If you want your walls to have a brick, stone, or wood pattern, this is the time to use an impression mat. They can be purchased in a variety of designs at most craft stores or online. I made my own brick impression mats from different size cross-stitch forms by cutting hundreds of tiny rectangles, but then - I'm retired 😊

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Bake at 350 degrees for 15 min for 1/4" thick, 20 - 25 min for 3/8" thick. Check pieces - different sizes may need different settings. To make melted candy windows, allow the piece to cool completely. Lay on sheet pan on top of a piece of lightly greased foil. Fill window with crushed candy pieces (Jolly Ranchers work really well). Place back in the oven and heat only until candies melt and fill corners (use a toothpick if necessary). If you use different colors in a window, you can swirl them while it's hot. Let the candy harden. Remove foil from back.

Larger structure/support pieces should be rolled 3/8". Pieces that are not support can be rolled 1/4" or thinner. Dough rolled paper-thin must be watched closely while in the oven - maybe 5 min. Thin dough can be used for shingles. Use a small cutter.

Anytime BEFORE you apply any royal icing, if a piece is not completely dry or you see that it is slowly bending out of shape at room temperature, PUT IT BACK IN THE OVEN at 250 - 300 degrees. Pieces that are draped over a mold may need to be set at 200 for about 45 min - 1 hr. They MUST be completely baked or they will cave-in. The low temp will dry, but not brown the surface.

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If you need to create something that is not constructed with flat pieces, there are silicon molds that can be used in the oven. Most craft stores carry them and you can get a mold of almost anything online. If you need a 3-D piece, make sure your mold has right and left cavities.

If you can't find a mold, you can make your own out of tin foil. The result is very crude and you'll need to do lots of whittleing, carving and sanding, but it can be done. I've used this technique to make jaguars, a dog, a submarine, a fountain sculpture, and an octopus. If you're not up for the challenge, it is much less difficult to make items out of fondant or gumpaste.

## **5. Construction and support**

If you are building a house, and you've made construction grade gingerbread, you may want to mitre the edges for a tighter joint, (meaning to cut the edges at a 45 degree angle). You can use sand paper and an exacto knife (be careful!). You may also have access to more sophisticated tools such as a Dremel, scroll saw, or even a Laser (which was used by the 2018 National Gingerbread Champion!)

There are several means of adhering the walls together. Royal icing is a very popular edible glue. I have also read where folks have used melted gummy bears or honey. My technique is to cut a thin strip of fondant the length of the wall, moisten the edges and then press the fondant between the two walls. This works especially well if you have mitered your edges.

You'll want to prop up your walls with cans while the joints are drying.

So now let's think about interior support. Your piece needs to be 85% edible, so that leaves some leeway for non-edible support. It is possible to build a 100% edible structure, especially smaller buildings. However, humidity and hundreds of tiny little hands poking and prodding your display take a toll on the integrity and stability of your creation. So you may want to add some non-edible support such as wood dowels, skewers, coffee or paint stirrers, even metal rods or book shelf brackets for extreme support. Cardboard and foamcore warp in humidity, so I recommend using plastic outdoor signs (you know like a FOR SALE sign you can get from Home Depot).

Once the walls are set, and you have added support (or not), you're ready to raise the roof and then on to other elements.

## **6. Edible materials and their uses**

My favorite thing about the Gingerbread Extravaganza is discovering all the different edible materials other builders use in their creations. Come on, who doesn't love Pez walkways, the aroma of chocolate, a pastel colored NECCO roof, or the charm of a melted peppermint candy base?

These other builders inspire me to use all kinds of things in my displays. I've made sea oats out of mustard seeds, onion skins, and spaghetti. I've also used different sizes of pasta dipped in icing for fence posts. I've used coffee to represent tiny stones and ground coffee looks like soil. I found parsley and oregano are great for shrubs and wreaths. I've made palm trees out of wafer paper and piroline rolls, hay out of shredded wheat, cut letters out of fruit roll ups, and ironically, used wintergreen lifesavers for life preservers. I'll also mention that I've made an ocean out of boiled sugar. It was beautiful, but oozed in this Florida humidity. I now use isomalt to create water. I've

also used isomalt for windows, and colored it to make eyes, and jewels.

I have used ground gingerbread mixed with fondant for repairs of my displays for several years. I thought I was oh so very clever until I saw a Food Network show called Gingerbread Giants. Turns out, Pat Howard who is a three time National Champion, invented Gingerbread clay in 2008. It consists of ground gingerbread, water and gum arabic. She uses it like fondant to create all kinds of figures for her gingerbread displays.

Speaking of Pat Howard, she also creates fabric by microwaving gelatin, mixed with water. She then spreads it on a mat and dusts the mixture with cornstarch. It looked really cool. I have also seen lace made with a product called Sugar Veil. Both products stay flexible which can come in handy.

Another Gingerbread Champion, Sara Aicher, uses gelatin sheets for her windows. These sheets have a beautiful diagonal pattern that looks like real window panes. She cuts the sheet a little larger than the window opening and places it on the backside of the gingerbread piece. Then she sandwiches the gelatin between another piece of gingerbread like the frame of a window. This keeps the gelatin taut and secure.

But hands down the most prevalent and useful edible material is sugar clay. There are several kinds you can make or buy and they all have good characteristics. Fondant is very malleable, but most brands don't get rock hard. Gumpaste dries very hard but usually cracks and pastillage dries quickly and becomes very hard, but is very brittle. We've found that a mixture of fondant and gumpaste makes a great medium for most figurines or decorations you want to make. It works well in silicon molds and can be dyed, painted, or dusted with edible colors.

## **7. Retailers**

I doubt there's anyone in America that doesn't know Hobby Lobby, Michael's and Joann Fabrics sell baking and decorating supplies. They all have coupons and all have similar stock. My one tip is not to limit your perusing to the Baking aisle. I've found neat stuff all over these stores. I have purchased tools and molds designed for clay and wood, stencils designed for paint, and I've rolled out gingerbread super thin and used paper punches.

There are numerous online sites for things like isomalt, gelatin sheets and would you believe you can order gum arabic from Walmart?

## **8. Preservation**

Continued on next page.

## **8. Presevation**

Not everyone wants to keep their creation. But if you're interested in preserving it, read on. I first built a display in 2010. It is still standing as well as all the others I constructed over the years. Although I do repairs on each one and keep them away from humidity, the credit for their longevity goes to my brother-in-law. He kept telling me to spray them with laquer and finally I decided to try it. I've used several different brands, all have worked well. I look for ones that say, non-yellowing, UV and water resistant. I prefer matte, but there are satin and high gloss choices as well.

## **9.Time-saving idea**

We want you to be a part of this wonderful local event, so my last suggestion is for anyone overwhelmed by what you just read or heard, or you have young children that want to be included:

After getting a strong base, buy several different pre-packaged gingerbread house kits and create a village. Or get creative... mix up the pieces and build something totally unexpected! Decorate with tons of candy from the dollar store. Turn an ice cream cone upside down, smear it with icing and you have a tree. Pretzels can be fence posts, marshmallows become snowmen. Use your imagination! Then dust with crushed coconut and you'll have a charming, traditional display in the blink of an eye.

## **10. Any Questions?**

We hope this has helped and look forward to seeing your creations in the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Gingerbread Extravaganza!

EJ McIntyre