

Soap Making for Dummies

By: A Farmer

One of the things I have always wanted to do is learn how to make my own soap. I saw the recipes and couldn't see how those ingredients would make soap. I had to set that aside and go with it. But I was always stonewalled when it came to making the kind of soap I really wanted to make - pine tar soap. It is virtually unavailable except in some specialty catalogs and the Internet. That spells \$\$ because of the shipping charges. There had to be a better way.

I presented the question to the rubicon Back to Basics board where vertex jumped right in and directed me to <http://www.millersoap.com/> site where pine tar was discussed. But it didn't say how much to use. Guesswork is hard enough, but even harder when just starting out. Still, I wanted to have pine tar soap and making it myself seemed the only logical means to that end.

Using one of vertex's recipe's I set out to make my first batch of soap. I had a number of prepared soap molds for the event, sprayed with cooking spray and standing at the ready. I mixed the lye into distilled water and set that aside. Then I went about mixing the oils, heating them while stirring. When that looked well blended, I added about a quarter cup of pine tar into the oils, stirring until well blended. When the lye solution had cooled off a bit - and the oils maintained a temperature of 115 degrees, I added the lye to the oils.

Working in my garage, I was ready to sit and stir for the next 15-20 minutes until the mixture started to trace. The mixture wasn't going to let me stir for the 15-20 minutes. It started to thicken almost instantly and traced within 7 minutes. Of course, the thought that I screwed it up somewhere along the way flashed through my head. I tried to think where I could have gone wrong that it would trace so fast. Oops, no time for reflection - time to start pouring, while I still can. The recipe made about 16 bars of soap using some small ornamental molds as well as standard 4-ounce molds - but I couldn't pour the last of the soap out of the bowl as it had hardened that fast.

I closed up the garage and let the newly poured soap set over night. The next evening, I popped them out of the molds and set them on a wire rack to cure. Not all of the soaps came out of the molds as they should have. Some were ornate - palm trees and dolphins. The tails of the dolphins and trunks of the palms broke during the process. Note to self - don't use the ornate molds until I have some experience under my belt. Nonetheless, I set the broken pieces on the wire rack to cure as well.

The greatest invention I've found in soap molds are the "massage" molds. See them at below link. I far prefer these soaps and believe it or not, they really do feel invigorating. And for \$1.99 per mold tray, with 3-4 bars per tray, you really can't go wrong. I also found the "turtle" molds have that same massaging feel



I wanted to try making fewer bars at a time - to use fewer molds and give me the time to pour them all correctly. And I found a smaller recipe on the at millerssoap.com Still, I wanted to experiment with measures rather than weights. It's just easier for me. For about seven 3-ounce bars, I modified a small batch recipe to my liking. It looks like this:

1/4 cup Lye
6 oz distilled water
1 cup. Vegetable oil or Crisco
1-1/3 cup Peanut oil
1/2 of one standard crayon - for coloring
2 oz liquid Potpourri

Mix the lye in the water and set aside. The chemical reaction of lye and water will become very hot, very fast. Make sure you "set it aside to cool" in a safe place - such as in the sink. A spill or splash of this mixture will burn severely and on contact. Place the oils and crayon in a microwave-safe bowl and heat on medium for 1 minute. Stir until the crayon is dissolved. Prepare the molds with a lining of plastic wrap (actually, too cumbersome for my fat fingers) or spray with cooking spray. With a candy thermometer, check the temperature of the oils. It should be between 105-120 degrees. Then test the lye solution in the same way to ensure it has cooled to below 125. Pour the lye solution slowly into the oils and stir. Then pour the entire contents of the bowl back into the (4-cup) measuring cup that held the lye solution and continue to stir. Use a stick blender to ensure all ingredients are completely blended. Stop the blender every few minutes and extract it. Check to see if the dripping mixture forms a little peak on the surface or if it just sinks immediately back into the rest of the mix. If it forms a little peak, it is ready for the liquid potpourri. Pour the potpourri into the mix and make sure it blends thoroughly - then pour into the molds. You have about one minute before the mixture will be too thick to pour. Another

benefit of making a small batch. As soon as the molds are poured, rinse all the bowls and measuring cups in hot soapy water.

Draw the edge of a popsicle stick over the mold to ensure the surface is flat and even. This is just an esthetic move and not really necessary. A lumpy bar of soap works just as well as one that sits evenly in a soap dish. After 24 hours, turn the mold trays over and the soaps should just pop right out. They do not just pop out of the Dixie cups, however. The Dixie cups have to be literally peeled off the soaps. The saran wrap lining would save the cups for future pours, but again - my fingers and plastic wrap were not made for each other. Better to keep a good supply of Dixie cups on hand for their one-time use as soap molds. Once out of the molds, set the bars on a wire rack to cure for a minimum of 2 weeks.

The benefit of using all vegetable oils rather than animal fats is that the bars can be completely cured in two weeks as opposed to the 4-6 weeks usually recommended.

All this experimenting with soap recipes has taken place in just 3 weeks from that first batch in the garage. I now make the soaps in my kitchen. I've added knotted ropes to my soap molds so that when poured, the knot is completely submerged in the soap. Making my own version of soap-on-a-rope is great. Unlike the store-bought variety that goes around your neck, my rope loops are shorter so it can be hung on a faucet, on a shower head or even on a wrist. I am getting off cheap on Christmas presents this year - as my soaps will be finding their way under the Christmas trees of a few close friends.

The first batch with the Pine Tar have already been included in the frequent "CARE packages" one of my neighbors sends to Iraq for her son and other troops. Shortly, the soaps-on-a-rope will be making their way overseas, as well.

Keeping our troops in mind - and the soaps that would go to Iraq, I thought a smaller, more compact soap would be in order. I would send each bar in a ziplock bag which could be stuffed anywhere in a pack, but didn't want to resort to the little hotel version bars, either. I just happen to keep little Dixie cups in my cupboard for those times when I need to take a pill and don't want to dirty a mug or glass for the purpose. So I sprayed the inside of a few Dixie cups with cooking spray and used them as molds. Actually, when filled to the top, they measure exactly 4 ounces - same as a regular bar of soap, but the "Dixie cup" form may be easier to stuff somewhere in a pack or pocket. Well, that's my thought on it, anyway.

I started putting the knotted ropes in the Dixie cups and those have turned out very well, too. The added benefit is that once hardened, they can be hung from the rope's loops to reduce the space needed on wire racks for the curing process. I then started experimenting with netting sponges. Instead of the net sponge being on the outside, they are inside the bars of soap with just a small corner protruding from them. I thought that might be easier for troops in Iraq than having to deal with a sponge or washcloth AND bar of soap.

One of the errors I made was pouring too soon. I was just tired and thought I could speed the whole process up by pouring before evidence of it tracing. It doesn't work. You have to wait for the trace. This batch went in the trash.

I also experimented with the pine tar. I tried to use pine tar as part of the oil measurements rather than adding some to the heated oils. That was a wasted batch. Too thick, won't blend with the oils. Another batch went into the trash. And I suspect a few more batches will end up in the trash as I continue to try new things with my soap-making endeavors. When I do, I'll be sure and keep everyone posted on what doesn't work