

## SOAP BASICS

Hello, herbal people! I am so happy to be here, to be part of this great herbal community. I've used herbs in soap as long as I've been making soap. Making soap and working with herbs are two of my favorite activities and putting them together is a special kind of happiness.

Tina has told me that many of you are already accomplished soapmakers, and that many of you have never made soap at all. I want to start somewhere along that continuum, in hopes of having something useful for everyone. In almost everything I do, I believe that the basics are well revisited. I'm going to give a very basic soapmaking procedure and formula, and elaborate on it by giving instructions for a "folded" herbal soap.

Please Note – Although soapmaking is pretty simple once you know what you are doing, you need to be sure to have everything you need before starting. In particular – Protection for your eyes and skin. Protective eyewear is an immutable essential. I'm a wild and wooly type, eschewing garden gloves and even shoes most of the time. And, I never make soap without eye protection. You also need protective gloves, and regular old yellow kitchen gloves – with no holes – are perfect.

An extremely useful basic set up for small batches of soap can most likely be had with little effort. Gather two four-cup Pyrex measuring cups, a scale that weighs at least to .25 ounces, a silicone spatula/scrapper, a few small plastic food storage containers or drawer organizers, and a hand towel. You'll mix and combine in the Pyrex cups, stir with the spatula, use the containers as molds, and the towel as insulation. And don't forget your eye and hand protection!

To make soap, you need to have lye, aka sodium hydroxide. If you quail at the memory of "Grandma's Lye Soap" take heart – time and trial has vastly improved home made soap. Every oil and fat has a "saponification value" which is the amount of lye it takes to turn it into soap. You use enough lye, mixed with water, to saponify the blend of oils you are using. It is very important that when you combine the lye and water that you always add the lye to the water and not the other way around. The reaction between the lye and the water is immediate and intense – making the solution heat up to near boiling almost instantly. It will steam, and be sure not to inhale it. Some people wear a fume mask, turn on a fan once the solution is made, or make the solution outside. For these recipes, you'll be working with about 2 - 2.25 ounces of lye to 5 ounces of water, so the steam won't be unmanageable. You can buy lye at some Big Box stores, and you can always find it online through soap supply shops. It is worth noting that Red Devil Lye, the brand that my Grandmothers and Great-grandmothers used to make soap (once they stopped leaching water through wood ash to make lye solution) has gone out of business. On the old metal cans there was even a recipe for making soap! Apparently the misguided people who make Methamphetamine – aka "crank" – use lye to make it and it has created all kinds of restrictions on the lye business. So, lye is less easy to find, but you can manage it without much fooling around.

These recipes use a technique that many call "room temperature cold process." I prefer to call it "energy exchange." It has been customary procedure for some time for home soapmakers to warm the oils to about 100 - 120 after the lye solution has cooled to that range, and mix the two when the temperatures match. I've found that for simple recipes,

using the heat from the lye solution to warm and/or melt the oils is a better way to use the energy generated by the lye/water reaction.

### RECIPE #1 – 100% OLIVE OIL SOAP

This makes a very hard bar with a low, creamy foam. Soap at its most simple.

Ingredients:

- 16 ounces olive oil (Make sure you get 100% olive oil and not a blend. You can use Extra Virgin, Pomace, Organic, any kind you like. )
- 2 oz. lye
- 5 oz. water

Procedure: In one of the Pyrex 4 cup measures, place 16 oz of olive oil. Put on your gloves and goggles.

In the other, place 5 ounces of water. Weigh the 2 ounces of lye into a small plastic container a single-serving yogurt container is perfect. Stirring and leaning away from the steam, sprinkle the lye onto the surface of the water a little at a time. Stir until the lye is dissolved. Put the container you used to measure the lye in the sink and rinse without splashing. Pour the hot lye solution in a stream into the olive oil, stirring constantly. Place the empty lye solution Pyrex into the sink and rinse without splashing.

Go back to the “baby soap” and begin stirring. If this is the first time you’ve made soap, go ahead and keep stirring with the spatula until the mixture is the thickness of crepe batter or heavy cream, this could happen anywhere from right a way to over an hour. (Once you’ve made soap a few times, get an inexpensive immersion blender to save time.) The varying states of thickness are called “trace.” New soapmakers tend to get very stressed, wondering, “Has it traced yet?” The mixture goes from translucent to opaque as you stir it, thickening as you go. You want to be sure the chemical reaction is well under way, and trace is the way to tell. When you think it is getting thick, lift the spatula and let the “batter” dribble back onto the surface of the soap. If it sits on the surface of the batter for a little bit before sinking in, it is tracing. You want to pour it into the mold before it gets so thick that you have to scoop and glop it.

Once the soap is traced, pour it into the molds. This recipe makes about 23 ounces, and you can pour it all into one container or divide it into a few smaller ones. Scrape all the mixture out of the Pyrex, put the Pyrex and spatula in the sink.

Spread out the towel on a surface where the soap can sit undisturbed. If you use multiple containers, line them up side by side so that they touch. Fold the towel over the filled molds, and let it sit while you clean up. Wipe any leftover soap out of the Pyrex with a paper towel and put it in a baggie. When the soap on the paper towel finishes saponifying, you’ll have a nice soap-permeated cleaning cloth.

Be sure to never rinse blobs of raw soap down the drain, as it will make a terrible clog.

Be sure you wear your goggles and gloves during clean up. Very hot water and detergent will take care of the clean up in no time. Wash everything and set it out to dry. Now, turn your attention back to your soap. It will get firmer as it sits, and will probably cool off and heat up a couple of times over night. When you are starting, wait two days before taking it out of the mold. To make this easy, put the full molds in the freezer for about an hour, take them out - wearing eye and hand protection - and place them upside down on a paper-covered work surface. Push on the bottom of the container and the soap should pop right out. If it doesn't, put it back in the freezer for another hour, and try again. There you have it, fresh soap, sitting right there! Use a stainless steel knife to cut it into

bars, choosing the size that appeals to you. Sit the soap to dry and cure for about two weeks on brown paper in an out of the way place. Turn the bars every couple of days.

## RECIPE #2 – MY FAVORITE BASIC

This makes a gentle very bubbly soap.

Ingredients:

- 11 ounces olive oil
- 5 ounces coconut oil – You can usually find it in jars at the health food store. It is solid at room temperature. This is what makes the lovely lather.
- $\frac{1}{2}$  ounce (1 Tablespoon) Castor oil – You can find this in small amounts in the laxative section of the pharmacy. When you make more soap, go ahead and order some online for much better prices. This tiny amount of castor oil is a big boost to your lather.
- 2.25 oz. lye
- 5 oz. water

Procedure: The procedure is the same, the only slight difference that the coconut oil will be melted by the heat of the lye solution. That heat is enough to melt the coconut without trouble.

So, there you have them, two recipes for small amounts of simple, perfect soap. Now, to add the herbs.

Almost any herb you can grow can be used in some way in soapmaking. Whether or not the benefits of any herbs survive the soapmaking process is up for debate. A bright green peppermint fleck will turn brown in a few days, and beautiful lavender buds will look a lot like dead fleas. But, it doesn't matter to me; I love to load up my bars with as much herb power as possible.

**Herbal infused water.** Basically strong herbal tea; strain out the depleted herbs before using. Use this in place of plain water to make the lye solution. Be sure that it is cold! You don't want more heat in that lye solution. Usually, herb infused water will turn greenish brown or bright orange or some other alarming color and have an even more alarming odor. Don't worry; neither the color nor smell will make it into the bars.

**Herb infused oil.** Infuse your liquid oils as usual, straining out any depleted herbs before using. The soap may get some color from infused oils, but not usually.

**Herb bits and pieces.** You can add dry herbs to your soap as it begins to trace. Make sure the soap is thick enough to suspend the herbs throughout the mass so they don't all sink to the bottom or float on the top. If you want to make an herbal layer on the top of the soap, add the herb topping after the soap has been poured. Almost all herbs turn brown when stirred into the soap, so big pieces can be kind of gross. Dried calendula petals keep their color and are very pretty stirred in as well as on top.

For a recent "soap swap" between fellow soapmakers, I made "three fold" herbal soaps, meaning I used the herb three ways to make the soap. I used freshly harvested herbs from my garden. For each soap Comfrey, Lemon Verbena and Rosemary I used herb infused-water and oils, and either stirred dried herb into the "batter" at trace or placed herbs on top as decoration. Another "fold" could be to add the matching essential oil, but in this case, I only wanted to use what came from my own garden. Which of course has me dreaming of a tiny still ...

If you have questions about the herbal soapmaking projects in the column, please don't hesitate to contact me. I'm always eager to talk soap and herbs! Please let us know if you have herbal soapmaking topics you'd like to see here.

Alicia Grosso  
[annabellaandcompany.com](http://annabellaandcompany.com)