

Beeswax

Beeswax is a natural product of nature. It is produced by worker honey bees from special glands and molded by the worker bee, through the use of her mouthparts, into comb. Comb is pure beeswax cells that are six-sided facing opposite directions from a midrib. When produced by the worker honey bees, beeswax is white but it quickly darkens from contamination with pollen and contact with the bees in the bee hive. Beeswax taken from the bees and melted by the beekeeper generally is a lemon yellow in color.

Beeswax has a fairly high melting point between 143-145 °F. Beeswax burns very slowly. It is very stable and subject to deterioration by very few solvents. The sun will bleach beeswax but few other materials effect it. It has been brought out from ship wrecks after decades under salt water in good condition. Beeswax has a natural and very fragrant aroma. The two qualities of aroma and slow burning make beeswax candles truly unique and superior. Beeswax is very useful in cosmetics and as a wax for many purposes.

Obtaining Beeswax

Beeswax is a by-product of beekeeping. Generally for every 100 pounds of honey a beekeeper produces one to two pounds of wax will be produced. The beeswax usually comes from the cappings of the cells filled with honey. The beekeeper removes these wax cappings before extracting the honey from the beeswax comb. Occasionally beekeepers melt down old comb producing a beeswax that is dark in color. The honey bee is the only source of beeswax.

Those interested in making beeswax candles or other beeswax products can obtain the wax from beekeepers, from companies that make candles, or from hobby shops. Generally, the beekeeper is the best source of the wax. Light wax is preferred in candlemaking but is not always available. The most common reasons wax darkens are contamination with propolis, which bees use in their hives to smooth rough surfaces or seal cracks, and darkening from contact with containers of iron, aluminum, copper and some other metals. It is fairly difficult to try to lighten wax that has been contaminated or has been darkened through contact with an improper metal.

Preparing Beeswax for Use

Generally beeswax needs to be cleaned before use. Since beeswax has a low density, it floats readily in water. Virtually all the impurities in beeswax, particularly honey, are heavier than it is.

The easiest way to remove dirt and other materials from beeswax is to put it in a tub of hot water and let it melt. The

beeswax can be ladled from the top and placed in plastic or stainless steel pans. CAUTION – BEESWAX IS FLAMMABLE. Do not let the water boil when melting wax. If beeswax should boil over or flow onto the burner there is danger of a violent fire. When handling beeswax, low heat and careful attention are advisable.

Paper milk cartons or plastic milk or juice containers make good wax containers. If impurities are found on the bottom of chunks, the cleaning process can be repeated.

Molded Candles

Beeswax candles have been used for hundreds of years. They are slow burning and have a pleasant natural aroma. With the proper wick they are smokeless and dripless. Candles that are at least 51% beeswax are still used in some churches particularly the Roman Catholic Church. The wax serves as a symbol of purity and the Virgin Mary because of its origin from the worker honeybee. In addition the volatilized beeswax coated and helped protect the church's paintings.

Beeswax can be molded in any number of interesting shapes. Beeswax contracts considerably when solidifying from the liquid state and this must be compensated for when using a mold. The larger the size of the mold, the greater the shrinkage, the value and the uniqueness of beeswax lies in the beeswax itself rather than in the form of the candle and few advocate the necessity for trying to create novel sizes and shapes with beeswax. Likewise, there seems to be little gained from adding colors, aromas or other substances. These types of candles can be made easier and with less trouble with paraffin.

Ordinary candle molds as well as unusual ones can be purchased from hobby shops and from bee supply companies. Prior to starting, wick suitable for the diameter of the candle and substance (beeswax) should be in place. Most candle molds come supplied with directions on how to install wicking. At the top of the mold you need a little excess wicking for initial lighting of your candle when it is completed. Traditional taper molds usually provide this feature since the candles are made in pairs and one piece of wicking runs down one candle through the top and back into the mold and down through the second candle. Once the wicking is in place and centered it should be pulled taut. Any excess holes at the top of the mold can be covered with wax or clay or alternately the candle mold can be placed on a piece of sponge dipped in cold water before pouring the wax. Always work on a surface you can clean in case the wax is spilled or it leaks from the mold around the holes for the wicking.

Only the finest beeswax should be used in molded candles. Prepare this by putting chunks of beeswax in a stainless steel or properly tinned container in softly boiling water. After it is completely melted, let it settle and cool slightly before pouring. Pour the beeswax in an even, steady manner. Beeswax has a tendency to stick to molds and all molds should be properly greased with silicon spray or a vegetable oil before use. Some old molds that are pitted and rough may not be suitable for beeswax. Since the beeswax will contract you will need to add further wax at the bottom of the mold about 2 to 5 minutes after initial pouring. Remove the excess wax from the bottom of molds (most have a rim to hold a reservoir of excess wax) soon after it has hardened. This is a simple operation if done while the wax is still warm and soft.

The candles can be removed from the mold after they are completely hardened. This usually should be the next day. With molds that don't come apart, the wicking needs to be cut before the candle can be pulled from the mold. If the thin layer of silicon does its job, the candles should come out of the molds fairly easily. Sometimes putting the mold in the freezer for a few minutes before pulling out the candle or running warm (not hot) water over the mold before pulling out the candle helps. If beeswax does get stuck to a mold, the mold must be thoroughly cleaned before reuse. Lye solution is about the only common solvent that will loosen beeswax. However, lye is extremely caustic and dangerous and caution is advised when using it to clean a mold.

Dipped Candles

Dipped candles are very distinctive and very appealing. They are more difficult to make but usually worth the extra time and effort.

Dipped candles must be perfectly straight to be appealing. They are made straight by initially starting with the wick drawn taut in a frame. You will want to construct a frame that will be suitable for the size of container you will be using. By all means try to use a large container and make a number of dipped candles at one time. Frames that seem most convenient are those that you can use to dip the first 5 to 10 times and then dismantle before continuing to final size.

The dipping procedure is not complicated. On the first dip you should leave the wicking in a minute so the wax soaks into it. Following this, the candles are dipped, on their frame, into the wax and then withdrawn in one motion. The wax should be at a temperature that maintains the liquid state but should not be excessively hot. A hook on the frame is useful because you will want to hang the wet candles for a period of 3 to 5 minutes between dips to solidify. After 5-7 dips, the wax candles will be roughly the diameter of a pencil and can be removed from the frame to dip individually. Alternately, if you construct a frame that holds several candles, you can dip several candles together using the tip of the dismantled frame. Continue the dipping process until the candle is roughly 3/4 to 7/8 inches wide. Prior to the last dip the extra wax at the bottom should be clipped off at the bottom of the wick. This will sometimes be as much as one inch long. The single drip at the end of the last dip should be retained marking the fact that it is a hand dipped candle. You can add a distinctive label prior to the last dip. The label will be visible under one or two layers of wax.

The most efficient dipping involves a large number of candles. To insure enough wax, have a second pot to melt extra beeswax to replenish your dipping pot as you go along. If you have some wax that is dark you could use it for the first dips, switching to the high quality beeswax for the last three to five dips. Dipped candles should be allowed to cool after dipping has been completed. Completed candles will be about 5 ounces in weight.

Rolled Candles

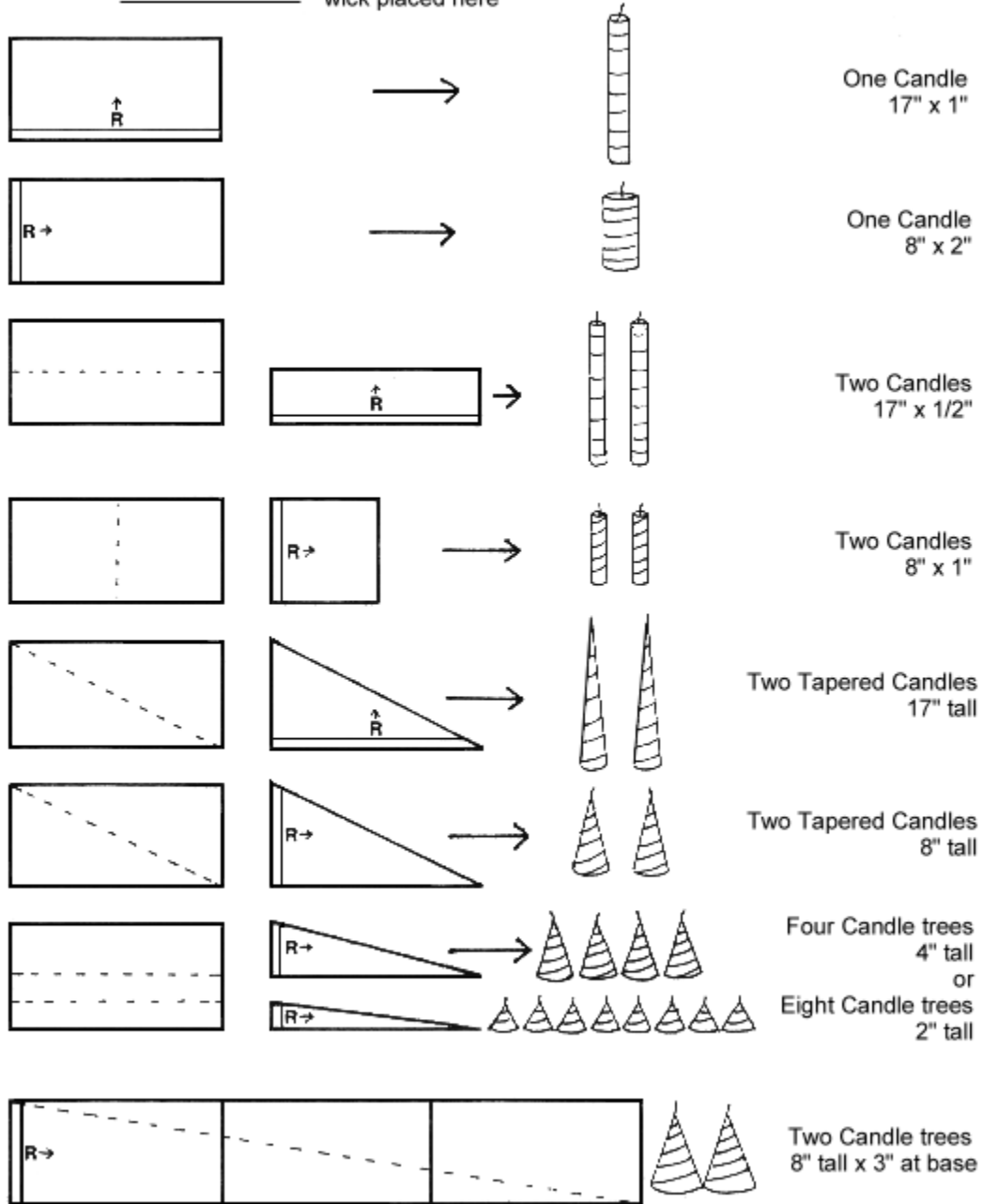
Another type of candle that may be made from beeswax is a foundation candle. Beekeepers use foundation to start their beeswax comb. Foundation sheets measure 8½" by 16¾" and have impressions of six-sided cells of the bee comb. By cutting and rolling these foundation sheets you may obtain some very attractive and unusual looking candles. Special books are

available from hobby shops or bee supply dealers illustrating some of the number of possibilities for foundation candles. These same firms sell the foundation sheets in a large variety of colors. You can use a single color or have a distinctive candle by combining 2 or more colors as you roll the candle. Some basic types of candles are shown in Figure 1.

Whether they are molded, dipped, or rolled, beeswax candles are attractive. They are very slow burning and have a pleasant aroma. Unusual shapes or additions do not necessarily enhance beeswax candles. Their uniqueness comes from the material, beeswax, rather than from size, shape, or color.

Figure 1. How to roll honeycomb candles

Legend: - - - - - cut wax foundation here
R → roll in this direction
 _____ wick placed here



Beeswax for Shows

Beekeepers prepare blocks of beeswax for exhibition at honey shows and fairs. It is important to have wax that is of proper color and odor for exhibition. Lemon yellow is the preferred and natural color. You must be sure to avoid discoloration by impurities in the wax or by reaction with metals when preparing wax for shows. Be careful of odor contamination too. Another problem to consider in preparing show entries is cracking. Smaller sized beeswax chunks have less tendency to crack than larger ones. Cracking is a problem because beeswax contracts when it solidified. The best way to prevent cracking is to let the wax cool slowly in a warm room. Heavily greased molds or mold sides well coated with soapy water helps prevent cracking because as the wax solidifies it can't stick to the side of the mold and produce an imperfection. Letting the wax harden very slowly by insulation sometimes is of benefit, especially with large chunks. By heating the environment in which the wax is solidifying there is more uniform solidification. Avoid having the surface harden quickly while the interior remains liquid. Use dry heat such as an oven or use a 160 °F water bath on three sides. You might even wish to add water to the top side after the surface solidifies.

Show entries should have square corners and even sides. This is difficult because of the shrinkage of beeswax while cooling. The larger the volume of wax the more pronounced the effect. One way of making sharp and distinct edges and corners is to put aluminum foil over the bottom and sides of an electric frying pan or regular frying pan and heating, on a very low heat, the edge of the beeswax chunk. Melt sides and corners slowly and uniformly until they are flat and square. From time to time pour off the melted wax. With patience you can secure a uniform block of wax with this technique.

The last consideration when submitting beeswax for entry in shows or fairs is that the beeswax be clean. There should be absolutely no dirt. The beeswax chunk should be uniform in appearance.

Beeswax Cosmetics

Beeswax is useful and beneficial in several types of cosmetics. When beeswax is combined with a mineral oil or olive oil and made into a paste or salve, the resulting mixture is soothing and protective to the skin. It provides a soft, flexible coating that resists water but which can be removed with soap. When beeswax became scarce during World War II, lanolin (from wool) and paraffin were developed for cosmetics and because they are cheaper today, beeswax has been replaced in many commercial cosmetic preparations. Neither are as stable or beneficial for the skin.

Cold Cream: a basic mixture would be as follows.

	Parts	%
Colorless mineral oil	3	50-1/3
White beeswax	1	16-2/3
Borax	5	6% of beeswax used
Water	2	33

Heat the oil and wax to 160 °F. Heat borax and water to 160 °F, mix and stir. Add perfume at 140 °F. Pour into jars at 120 °F.

Other oils can be used. If other waxy substances are added the amount of beeswax used should be reduced so the final cream isn't too firm. Other waxes used could be paraffin, ceresin and spermacetic. Total wax content shouldn't be more than 20%. To get a fluffy final product pass the cream through a colloid mill.

Books on cosmeticology can be consulted for other recipes. Chapter 8 in the book "Beeswax" by Root contains additional formulae for cosmetics. Also consult the book "Beeswax" by Robert Berthold (available from Beekeeping Education Service, PO Box 815, Cheshire, CT 06410) for other excellent suggestions on preparing candles and other items with beeswax.

Beeswax Waxes

Beeswax is used in a number of industries such as automotive, textile and shoe manufacturing. It produces a soft but highly glossy wax for furniture and floors. Some specific uses are as follows:

Waxing Nails – beeswax on a nail point reduces the force required to drive nails, reduces the percentage that bend and reduces wood splitting. Waxed nails have somewhat less holding power initially but this disappears with time. Place the point of the nail on a piece of beeswax before use.

Wax Molding – beeswax molds well around 100 °F and a little additional heating results in a soft, very pliable wax for all types of modeling. It is extensively used in molds such as a dentist uses.

Preservation – waxing rusty tools, saws, drills, etc. will make them last longer, halt the rust and make them easier to use.

Wax Polishes – beeswax polishes can be used on wood, leather, furniture, and floors. A beeswax – turpentine mix is great on wood, tile or linoleum. mix any proportion of beeswax to turpentine or mix 1 pound beeswax, 1 pint spirits of turpentine and 1 pint boiled linseed oil. Add the turpentine and oil to the melted wax. Use warm by applying a thin coat with a soft lintless cloth, let dry and then buff briskly with a wool cloth. On new wood, melting the wax mixture will ensure better absorption into the pores of the wood. Beeswax waxes polish very nicely by buffing with a soft cloth. Repeated applications may lead to a gummy waxy mass. Old coats can be removed by rubbing or with an organic solvent.

Adding naphtha results in a faster drying mix requiring less buffing. Since naphtha is flammable this is dangerous to mix. You can substitute carbon tetrachloride for naphtha to achieve the same result. A non-waterproof wax can be made by boiling beeswax in a solution of potassium or sodium carbonate or hydroxide to saponify and then adding water (to the soap produced). It works well on surfaces that are already finished.

Thread – waxing thread or needles with a small piece of beeswax will make sewing easier and faster.