

How to make soap

http://itdg.org/docs/technical_information_service/soapmaking.pdf

Introduction

With practice, soapmaking is not difficult and is suitable as a smallscale business. It uses simple equipment and vegetable oils or animal fats as raw materials, each of which is likely to be locally available in most countries. However, it is more difficult to produce high-quality hard soap, which in some countries is necessary to compete with imported products or those produced by large-scale manufacturers. There are also certain hazards in producing soap, which any potential producer must be aware of to avoid injury. This technical brief describes the procedures needed to make a variety of simple soaps and includes a number of recipes for different types of soap.

Figure 1: Bina Baroi with some of her finished soap products after soapmaking training from Practical Action Bangladesh. [Download the full PDF version to see this picture.](#)

Ingredients

There are three main ingredients in plain soap - oil or fat (oil is simply liquid fat), lye (or alkali) and water. Other ingredients may be added to give the soap a pleasant odour or colour, or to improve its skin-softening qualities. Almost any fat or non-toxic oil is suitable for soap manufacture. Common types include animal fat, avocado oil and sunflower oil. Lyes can either be bought as potassium hydroxide (caustic potash) or from sodium hydroxide (caustic soda), or if they are not available, made from ashes. Some soaps are better made using soft water, and for these it is necessary to either use rainwater or add borax to tap water. Each of the above chemicals is usually available from pharmacies in larger towns.

Caution!

Lyes are extremely caustic. They cause burns if splashed on the skin and can cause blindness if splashed in the eye. If drunk, they can be fatal. Care is needed when handling lyes and 'green' (uncured) soap. Details of the precautions that should be taken are given below.

Because of these dangers, keep small children away from the processing room while soap is being made.

How to make lye from ashes

Commercial lyes can be bought in tins from pharmacies in larger towns, and these are a standard strength to give consistent results. However, if they are not available or affordable, lye can also be made from ashes. Fit a tap near to the bottom of a large (e.g. 250 litre) plastic or wooden barrel/tub. Do not use aluminium because the lye will corrode it and the soap will be contaminated. Make a filter inside, around the tap hole, using several bricks or stones

covered with straw. Fill the tub with ashes and pour boiling water over them until water begins to run from the tap. Then shut the tap and let the ashes soak. The ashes will settle to less than one quarter of their original volume, and as they settle, add more ashes until the tub is full again. Ashes from any burned plant material are suitable, but those from banana leaf/stem make the strongest lye, and those from apple wood make the whitest soap.

If a big barrel is not available, or smaller amounts of soap are to be made, a porcelain bowl or plastic bucket can be used. Fill the bucket with ashes and add boiling water, stirring to wet the ashes. Add more ashes to fill the bucket to the top, add more water and stir again. Let them stand for 12 - 24 hours, or until the liquid is clear, then carefully pour off the clear lye.

The longer the water stands before being drawn off, the stronger the lye will be. Usually a few hours will be enough. Lye that is able to cause a fresh egg to float can be used as a standard strength for soap-making. The strength of the lye does not need to always be the same, because it combines with the fat in a fixed proportion. If a weak lye is used, more lye can be added during the process until all the fat is saponified¹.

How to make potash

Potash is made by boiling down the lye water in a heavy iron kettle. After the water is driven off, a dark, dry residue known as 'black salts' remains. This is then heated until it melts and the black impurities are burned away to leave a greyish-white substance. This is potash. It can be stored for future soapmaking in a moisture-proof pot to prevent it absorbing water from the air.

How to make soda lye and caustic soda

Mix 1 part quicklime with 3 parts water to make a liquid that has the consistency of cream. Dissolve 3 parts sal soda in 5 parts boiling water, and add the lime cream, stirring vigorously. Keep the mixture boiling until the ingredients are thoroughly mixed. Then allow it to cool and settle, and pour off the lye. Discard the dregs in the bottom. Caustic soda is produced by boiling down the lye until the water is evaporated and a dry, white residue is left in the kettle. Most commercial lyes are caustic soda, and these can be bought and substituted for homemade lye to save time. They are supplied in tins and the lids should be kept tightly fitted to stop the lye absorbing water from the air and forming a solid lump.

Care when using lyes, potash or caustic soda

You should always take precautions when handling these materials as they are dangerous. Be especially careful when adding them to cold water, when stirring lye water, and when pouring the liquid soap into moulds. Lyes produce harmful fumes, so stand back and avert your head while the lye is dissolving. Do not breathe lye fumes. It is worth investing in a pair of rubber gloves and plastic safety goggles. You should also wear an apron or overalls to protect your clothes. If lye splashes onto the skin or into your eyes, wash it off immediately with plenty of cold water.

When lye is added to water the chemical reaction quickly heats the water. Never add lye to hot water because it can boil over and scald your skin. Never add water to lye because it could react violently and splash over you.

How to prepare tallow

Cut up beef suet, mutton fat or pork scraps and heat them over a low heat. Strain the melted fat through a coarse cloth, and squeeze as much fat as possible out of the scraps.

¹saponification is the name given to the chemical reaction in which lye and fat are converted into one substance - soap

Clean the melted fat by boiling it in water. Use twice as much water as fat, add a tablespoon of salt per 5 kg fat, and boil for ten minutes, stirring thoroughly all the time. Allow it to cool and form a hard cake on top of the water. Lift off the cake of fat and scrape the underside clean. This is then ready to store or use in a soap recipe.

How to prepare oil

Vegetable oils can be extracted from oilseeds, nuts or some types of fruit (see Table 1 and the separate Technical Brief 'Oil Extraction'). They can be used alone or mixed with fat or other types of oil. Note: solid fats and 'saturated' oils (coconut, palm, palm kernel) are more suitable for soapmaking. 'Unsaturated' oils (e.g. safflower, sunflower) may produce soap that is too soft if used alone (see Table 2) and are not recommended.

Soapmaking

There are two types of soap: soft soap and hard soap. Soft soap can be made using either a cold process or a hot process, but hard soap can only be made using a hot process. To make any soap it is necessary to dilute the lye, mix it with the fat or oil, and stir the mixture until saponification takes place (in the processes described below, the word 'fat' is used to mean either fat or oil). The cold process may require several days or even months, depending upon the strength and purity of the ingredients, whereas the hot process takes place within a few minutes to a few hours.

Dispose of soap-making wastes carefully outdoors, do not put them in the drain.

Table 1: Types of fats and oils used in soapmaking.

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picture/table/diagrams.

Soft soap

Cold process

A simple recipe for soft soap uses 12 kg of fat, 9 kg of potash and 26 litres of water. Dissolve the potash in the water and add it to the fat in a wooden tub or barrel. For the next 3 days, stir it vigorously for about 3 minutes several times a day, using a long wooden stick or paddle. Keep the paddle in the mixture to prevent anyone accidentally touching it and being burned. In a month or so the soap is free from lumps and has a uniform jelly-like consistency. When stirred it has a silky lustre and trails off the paddle in slender threads. Then the soap is ready to use and should be kept in a covered container.

Boiling process

Soft soap is also made by boiling diluted lye with fat until saponification takes place. Using the same amounts as above, put the fat into a soap kettle, add sufficient lye to melt the fat and heat it without burning. The froth that forms as the mixture cooks is caused by excess water,

and the soap must be heated until this is evaporated. Continue to heat and add more lye until all the fat is saponified. Beat the froth with the paddle and when it ceases to rise, the soap falls lower in the kettle and takes on a darker colour. White bubbles appear on the surface, making a peculiar sound (the soap is 'talking'). The thick liquid then becomes turbid and falls from the paddle with a shining lustre. Further lye should then be added at regular intervals until the liquid becomes a uniformly clear slime. The soap is fully saponified when it is thick and creamy, with a slightly slimy texture. After cooling, it does not harden and is ready to use.

To test whether the soap is properly made, put a few drops from the middle of the kettle onto a plate to cool. If it remains clear when cool it is ready. However, if there is not enough lye the drop of soap is weak and grey. If the deficiency is not so great, there may be a grey margin around the outside of the drop. If too much lye has been added, a grey skin will spread over the whole drop. It will not be sticky, but can be slid along the plate while wet. In this case the soap is overdone and more fat must be added.

Hard soap

The method for making hard soap is similar to that for making soft soap by the boiling process, but with additional steps to separate water, glycerine, excess alkali and other impurities from the soap. The method requires three kettles: two small kettles to hold the lye and the fat, and one large enough to contain both ingredients without boiling over.

Put the clean fat in a small kettle with enough water or weak lye to prevent burning, and raise the temperature to boiling. Put the diluted lye in the other small kettle and heat it to boiling. Heat the large kettle, and ladle in about one quarter of the melted fat. Add an equal amount of the hot lye, stirring the mixture constantly. Continue this way, with one person ladling and another stirring, until about two-thirds of the fat and lye have been thoroughly mixed together. At this stage the mixture should be uniform with the consistency of cream. A few drops cooled on a glass plate should show neither separate globules of oil or water droplets. Continue boiling and add the remainder of the fat and lye alternately, taking care that there is no excess lye at the end of the process. Boiled hard soaps have saponified when the mixture is thick and ropy and slides off the paddle.

Up to this point, the process is similar to boiling soft soap, but the important difference in making hard soap is the addition of salt at this point. This is the means by which the creamy emulsion of oils and lye is broken up. The salt has a stronger affinity for water than it has for soap, and it therefore takes the water and causes the soap to separate. The soap then rises to the surface of the lye in curdy granules. The spent lye contains glycerine, salt and other impurities, but no fat or alkali. Pour the honey-thick mixture into soap moulds or shallow wooden boxes, over which loose pieces of cloth have been placed to stop the soap from sticking. Alternatively, the soap may be poured into a tub which has been soaked overnight in water, to cool and solidify. Do not use an aluminium container because the soap will corrode it. Cover the moulds or tub with sacks to keep the heat in, and let it set for 2 - 3 days.

When cold the soap may be cut into smaller bars with a smooth, hard cord or a fine wire. It is possible to use a knife, but care is needed because it chips the soap. Stack the bars loosely on slatted wooden shelves in a cool, dry place and leave them for at least 3 weeks to season and become thoroughly dry and hard.

Be careful! Uncured or 'green' soap is almost as caustic as lye. Wear rubber gloves when handling the hardened soap until it has been cured for a few weeks.

Problems in soapmaking

Problems that can occur in soapmaking and their possible causes are described in Table 2.

Table 2: Problems in soapmaking.

[Download the full PDF version to see this picture/table/diagrams.](#)

To improve hard soap

A better quality soap may be made by re-melting the product of the first boiling and adding more fats or oils and lye as needed, then boil the whole until saponification is complete. The time required for this final step will depend on the strength of the lye, but 2 - 4 hours' boiling is usually necessary. If pure grained fat and good quality white lye are used, the resulting product will be a pure, hard white soap that is suitable for all household purposes. Dyes, essences or essential oils can be added to the soap at the end of the boiling to colour it or to mask the 'fatty lye' smell and give a pleasant odour.

Hard soap recipes

The simplest and cheapest type of soap is plain laundry soap, but a few inexpensive ingredients can be used to soften the water or to perfume the product and create fine toilet soaps too. The following recipes are a few examples of easily made soaps. There are many more recipes in the information sources given at the end of this Technical Brief.

Simple kitchen soap

Dissolve 1 can of commercial lye in 5 cups cold water and allow it to cool. Meanwhile mix 2 tablespoons each of powdered borax and liquid ammonia in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup water. Melt 3 kg fat, strain it and allow it to cool to body temperature. Pour the warm fat into the lye water and while beating the mixture, gradually add the borax and ammonia mixture. Stir for about 10 - 15 minutes until an emulsion is formed, and pour the mixture into a mould to cool.

Boiled hard white soap

Dissolve 0.5 kg potash lye in 5 litres of cold water. Let mixture stand overnight, then pour the clear liquid into a second 5 litres of hot water and bring it to a boil. Pour in 2 kg of hot melted fat in a thin stream, stirring constantly until an emulsion is formed. Simmer for 4 - 6 hours with regular stirring, and then add 5 litres of hot water in which 1 cup of salt is dissolved. Test to ensure that the mixture is saponified by lifting it on a cold knife blade, to ensure that it is ropy and clear.

or

Dissolve 0.5 kg potash in 2 litres of cold water. Heat and add 2.5 kg melted fat, stirring constantly. Let the mixture stand for 24 hours and add 5 litres boiling water. Place it on a low heat and boil with constant stirring until it is saponified.

Labour-saving soap
