



Beginners' Corner by [Deb Hayes](#)

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Well, here we go again! It's May once more. The birds are singing, the grass is growing and the birds are all twitterpated. I saw some wild parakeets in my birch tree this morning, and it made me think of baby animals being born and birds hatching and all sorts of growing things. Here's hoping we all continue to grow as artists, too!

And now, on to the questions!

Deborah

Dear Editor:

I am a beginner in the polymer clay world, although I did take classes in the early '90's, I am just returning to this wonderful art. Here are my questions:

Vessels: I know that all of my clay tools are to be dedicated to polymer clay use. Are finished polymer clay bowls & teapots used for foodstuff? I am confused on the safety issue.

Reheating Clay: The heating issue is my one of my biggest areas where I err. I am using a conventional cooking oven that I plan to devote to clay exclusively. I've been hesitant to reheat clay...how does one do this without burning the finished/baked portion of the artwork? Is there a limit to the number of times one can reheat? Can you use Zap-A-Gap glue and reheat the item without damage or fumes or smoke?

Surgical Blades: How long do these last? Indefinitely as long as there is no major nick or ding or rust? How can I sharpen a dull blade?

Thanks for your help. I am certain I could provide you with monthly questions if you ever run low!

*Holly Hudson
Pennsylvania*

Dear Holly,

Thanks for your questions. With regard to food safety and polymer clay, it is advised that you decorate or embellish the handles or outsides of food vessels, but avoid clay on any surfaces that will touch food. Clay is listed as non-toxic, but not recommended for foodstuffs. There are no long-term studies that show the effects, so it's better to be safe than sorry.

For your second question, the good news is that you can bake and re-bake polymer clay as many times as you may need to in order to get the piece you want. However, the cyanoacrylate glues such as Zap-a-Gap are not recommended for baking. Heat is thought to weaken the bond, so for pieces that need to be baked and/or re-baked, I suggest using the liquid versions of Sculpey.

Liquid Sculpey comes in both translucent and white-tinted forms and makes an excellent bonding agent for holding clay to clay. It works very well on raw clay to raw, raw to baked, and baked to baked. One word of caution, though: its adhesive qualities happen **after** it is baked, so you will want to make sure the piece is supported until the liquid clay can cure.

Polyester batting works well for that, as does crumpled aluminum foil or paper. Make certain that your oven never exceeds the manufacturer's recommended temperature, as well (**do** be sure to check the temp with an oven thermometer).

Finally, the latest word on surgical blades is stainless steel. You can get several different types, from different manufacturers, and they don't rust! There has been some talk of sharpening blades with a sharpening stone, but results have been mixed. Since I can't throw anything out, when mine get dull, I save them for other uses. Dull blades that haven't enough edge for mokume gane or cutting canes are still good for cutting into a block of clay, or using to pick up small pieces of design that need to be attached. And, since you are clearly bright and creative, you can probably come up with even more uses. Good Luck!

Hi,

I'm a newbie and this weekend I tried to make some switchplate covers as my first project. They looked great, the only problem was that when I baked them, they stuck to the metal plate that I was using as the mold and I couldn't remove them without breaking

them. Do I have to put something (oil?) on the metal plate so the clay won't stick, or maybe I did something else wrong? I used a pasta machine to condition and get an even thickness. I would appreciate any advice you might have for me, and thanks for having your site, it's a great resource!

Barbara

Well, Barbara, thank **YOU** for subscribing and for taking the time to write to us. A polymer clay switchplate is one of the quickest and easiest projects out there, but they can be problematic. One of my first ones didn't stick, but broke into three pieces, when I bumped it. After that, mine were all a tad thicker!

In your case, the solution is spelled "release agent!" Instead of using oil, dust the switchplate form with some cornstarch before applying the clay. Voila, a quickly released design! Also, nylon switchplates can be baked, and they're cheap enough to leave the clay on them when you install them. A plain clay switchplate can be a bit weak, so the nylon form can help add 'structural" strength. I hope this helps. Remember, we have a gallery, and we want pictures!

Finally for this month, we have a couple questions from Laura.

I have a couple questions about Sculpey III clay and Superflex clay.

1. It seems the more that I knead or roll the clay in the pasta machine, the more air bubbles I find in the clay. How can I eliminate this problem? The more the Superflex is worked, the stickier it is to work with.

2. I had read that it is OK to use your oven to cook the clay, but I had also read that you should have a separate one to cook if you do it frequently. If you do not cook it with food, should not it be safe to use the food oven? Does it leave any thing toxic in the oven?

Laura, bubbles in the clay are the bane of many a clay artist's life. There are a couple of precautions to take that should improve yours.

First of all, always put your clay through the rollers of the pasta machine folded side first. This will force **out** the air that may be in the clay. As you roll thinner and thinner settings, the bubbles should work their way out. Also, only work the clay as much as you need to in order to get it warmed and conditioned. As the clay softens, bubbles are more likely, and if you overwork the clay, you may have a bigger problem.

If your clay is **too** soft, whether regular polymer clay or Superflex, you may get better

results after leaching the clay. No, no, not a leech! Leaching is simply a method for removing excess plasticizers from the clay, and it is easily done. All you need to do is put your sheet of conditioned clay between some sheets of plain paper such as used in copiers or printers.

If you want your clay to leach more quickly, you can weight it with a large book or other heavy object. When the paper looks oily, the plasticizer is coming out, so you should check the clay. If it's still too soft, leach it some more. Checking it often is a good idea, so you don't leach out too much.

As far as the oven goes, there are many clay artists who use only their kitchen oven for both cooking food and curing clay. If you are concerned about toxic residue, you can put the clay project into a disposable aluminum pan and cover it as you bake the clay. You can also wipe down the walls of the oven after curing clay if you prefer. Meanwhile, keep your eyes open for a small toaster oven at the second hand stores and yard sales. I bought my first oven online from a fellow clay artist, my second on sale for less than twenty dollars at a home center store, and I found a great convection oven here in my hometown at a yard sale.

If I can find deals like those, you can probably find one for free! Have fun!

Deborah

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