



# Conditioning Polymer Clay

With Deb Wood

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# Polymer Clay Conditioning and Blending

This method uses a pasta machine to help blend several colors of clay together more easily.



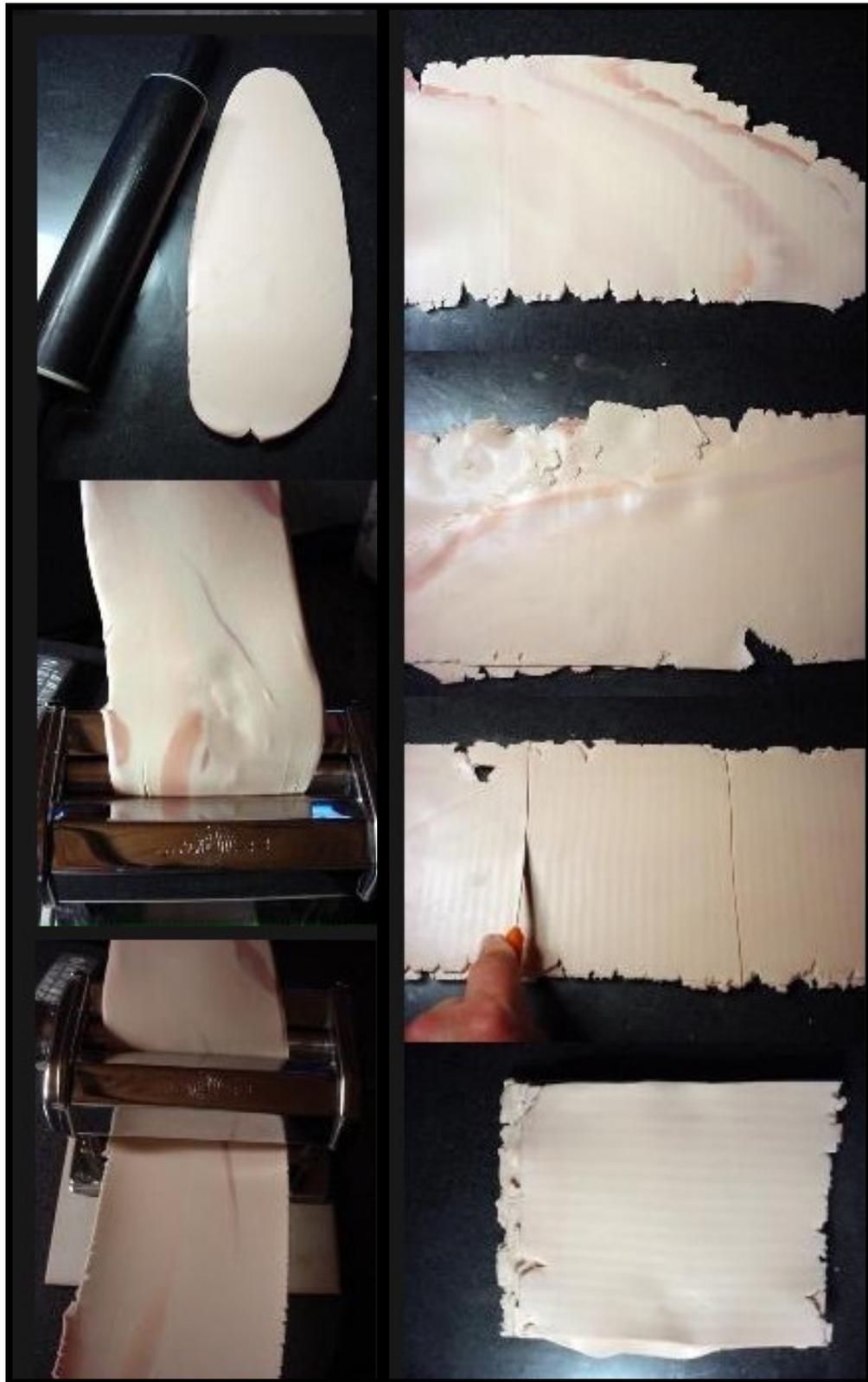
**Clay conditioning;** *not fun, unless you are mad at someone and want to take out your aggressions on something! I'm kidding, sort of. :)*

Really, it does take some serious strength and patience, but once you condition clay, it will stay conditioned for months. And conditioning is necessary, because clay needs to be 'awakened', the plasticizers have to be activated.

Again, for this tutorial, I am going to show you a series of photos that demonstrate my process. As I said, I work with a couple of pounds of clay at a time so there's a lot here- your process should be the same but would most likely be with less clay. Make sure your work surface is spotless and your hands are clean and lint free. I use a food processor, a Hamilton Beach 2 speed model, dedicated to clay processing only, (never used for food) to chop up the clay. It saves time and helps to warm the clay up before I begin to roll the clay. A pasta machine is also so helpful, particularly if you are going to be blending two colors together. The model I use is an Atlas, and I have had the same one for 20 years. It too has never seen a speck of flour, it's only used for clay.

I usually condition a great deal of clay at one time- this takes serious muscle work- but I don't mind. I would rather do a bunch at one time than have to do it often. Once the clay is properly conditioned, a process that reactivates the plasticizers in the clay (they are 'resting' or dormant when the clay is shipped to the stores) then it will stay in a usable state for quite a while. All that's needed later is to cut off the amount you need to use, roll it in your hands until it's warmed up a bit and you're ready to sculpt!! *The FUN part....*

Continue to roll the clay into a long coil, lay the coils side by side and flatten with a rolling pin. Roll this pad of clay through the pasta machine. You will get a long piece of clay. Lay this out on the table in two layers.



These photos show how I roll the clay into a long, narrow piece so it will fit through the pasta machine rollers. Into the pasta machine it goes. The setting on the pasta machine is at the largest, or widest gap between the rollers, setting #1 on the Atlas brand pasta machine. Continue to roll it through, supporting the other end so it doesn't get all messed up. This is almost a two person job, with one person feeding the clay through and the other person turning the crank on the machine.



Stack up those layers, staggering them a bit.



Roll them through the machine again, repeating the steps as before. If the sheet breaks apart, that's ok, as long as the clay is sticking together otherwise. If it's really dry and crumbly, you will need to add a conditioning agent- like oil or Mix Quick. See page 5.

Continue to roll the sheet of clay through the pasta machine, folding and rolling through again. It does help to rotate the clay pieces a quarter turn and run them through in the other direction.

Each time, you will see less and less separation in the coloring.

The streaks are becoming less noticeable now. The pasta machine really does speed up the process especially when you are adding a dark clay to a lighter one.





Squeeze the chunks together into a log, then a coil.

**This method uses a food processor to chop up the clay, but the rest of the process is done by hand.**

*When I am using a food processor, I will still cut the clay up as you see on page 2, otherwise you might break the blades in the processor as the clay binds up against the walls of the bowl.*

When using this method, blending individual colors of clay is made easier. You can slice several colors together and place them into the processor. If you look closely at this photo, you can see the different colors together. This speeds up the blending process considerably.

Process for about a minute or more, pulsing the processor first so the clay gets moving around in the bowl. Continue to process until the chunks look like cottage cheese– and are warmed up enough so they stick together when pinched into a clump.

*If the pieces don't seem like they are sticking together after a minute or so, then you can add some oil, vegetable, mineral or baby oil to the clay to hydrate it. A drop to an ounce of clay is usually enough. More than that is going to make the clay sticky. Use an eye dropper to be sure.*

Squeeze the clay pieces together and begin to roll out a coil. When you see the pictures on the next page, you'll see how much clay this is– and how many coils you will get! Stick with me– it's a lot of work but this does work well.



With this method, I just continue to roll and twist, roll and twist. Sometimes I pick the clay up and literally wring it like a dishcloth. This helps to squeeze out the air pockets between the coils of clay. Still rolling and twisting- in this photo I put the coils by my knife so you could see how much clay is there. Of course less clay takes a lot less time. You might want to try this process with a small amount of clay to see how it goes for you. This is good, old fashioned manual labor.



Still rolling and twisting, but now all the colors are blended. So, one more time through the process, then roll the clay into one big log. Squeeze hard—we're going to make this into one large piece of clay. Twisting really does help stretch and blend all those coils of clay.

Cut the clay into sections and continue to smooth and roll this, trying to squeeze out any air pockets. After cutting pieces, I roll and smooth again and prepare them for storage.

All done. I store these in Glad brand sandwich bags, away from heat and light.



### ***Storing Clay***

This demonstration is done with Eberhard Faber Puppen Clay, (Fimo Professional Clay) but it is the same for any brand I use. This clay will stay fresh in a dark, enclosed cabinet for several months. Be sure to make note of what colors and brands you have blended; mark this information on a label along with the date you blended the clay— and label each package of clay. You can also store clay in the freezer for extended periods of time.



Above, this is a combination of both methods. The first photo, above left, the sheets have been run through the pasta machine, the clay is squeezed together, twisted and rolled together, resulting in the same roll of clay.

### ***Cleaning the Processor Bowl***

Now that the clays have been manufactured with less plasticizers in them (due to changing EPA standards since 2008) I have found that the clays really, REALLY stick to the processor bowl. I used to think it was the processor bowl plastic and the clay was reacting to the plastic, but I found that was not the case. You might find the buildup on the processor bowl is nearly impossible to remove.

I have tried many different methods for cleaning the bowl and found only one thing that works well. After you're all done grinding up and blending clay, remove any excess clay pieces— then rub oil; vegetable oil or baby oil all over the inside of the bowl. Let this set for several hours. The oil will melt the residue in the bowl. Then use a spoon or something to scrape the clay from the bowl. Scrape off as much as you can, then use hot water and dishwashing detergent and a plastic scrubby to remove the rest of the residue. The bowl will still have a cloudy surface, but the clay will be mostly gone. You will want the bowl clean for the next time. Be sure to throw away the scrubby, you won't want to use it for anything else.

Hope you enjoyed this tutorial! Hugs, Deb

