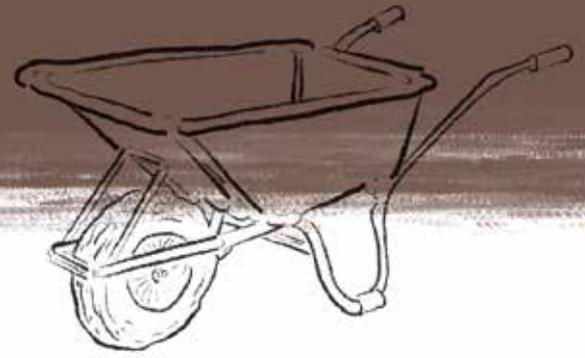


Cultivating AN EARTH-BASED PRACTICE



An introduction for facilitators, educators
and anyone who wants to meet wild clay

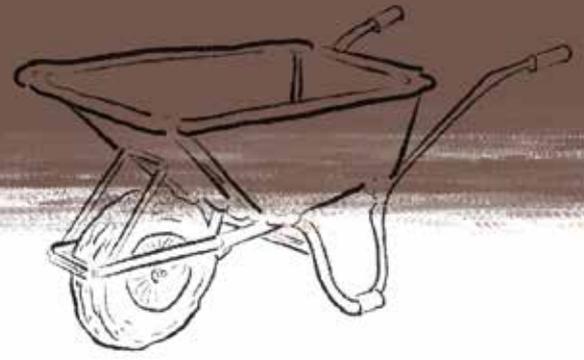
HARVEST



MATERIALS

- Wheelbarrow
- Pick axe & spade
- Hand trowel
- Spray bottle
- Large container (tub/bucket)
- Rubbish bag

HARVEST



Steps

Look for a clay harvesting site:

Try looking by river banks, stream beds or, if in a city, asking at construction sites.
Cracks in the ground are a good indicator of clay.

Use the sausage test to check for clay content:

Take a pinch of soil in the palm of your hand and spray with a little water.
Try to roll it into a sausage.
If it forms and bends without cracking, it's clay.
If it crumbles / cracks, it's more sand than clay.



Check land access:

Are resources abundant enough for you to harvest without negatively affecting the ecosystem?
Do you need / have permission to harvest here (from humans and other-than-humans)?

Dig:

Use the pick axe and spade to break up the soil and shovel it into the wheelbarrow.
Fill the wheelbarrow.
Remember, much of what you dig will be lost in the cleaning process so take more than the amount you want to end up with.

Soak:

Put what you've dug into a large container, cover with water and leave to soak for at least 24 hours.



PROCESS



MATERIALS

Container of existing clay mix

Large container (tub/bucket)

Smaller buckets/bowls (2)

Hand trowel

Sieve/fine mesh tray

Sponge

Cloth/fine mesh bag (e.g. muslin or an old pillow case)

Water access

This is a messy process so make sure you have an appropriate work space

PROCESS



STEPS

Part One

Mix:

Take your container of soaked clay mixture and stir it up as thoroughly as possible (with hands or feet), helping the clay particles break down and disperse in the water.

Separate:

A large proportion of the mixture will be organic waste (leaves, roots, stones, sand, etc) that needs to be filtered out, so use a smaller bucket or bowl to scoop out portions of the liquid and pour it through a sieve into a clean container.

Tip the organic waste from the sieve into a smaller bucket for disposal in the garden later.

If piles of rocks or sand are building up in the clay mixture, these can be separated out using a trowel, just be sure to let the clay water run off before throwing them out.

Repeat:

Add more water to the clay mixture and repeat the above two steps until the container is empty.

Clean up and wait for the clay to settle.

Part Two

Stir:

Check that the clay has settled at the bottom of the container, with the water sitting on top.

Pour off as much of the surface water as possible, trying not to disturb the clay underneath (you can also use a sponge).

Stir what's left (with hands or feet) until it's all the same consistency.

Separate:

Pour the clay liquid through a sieve into a cloth bag (or a large piece of cloth you can tie up in a bundle).

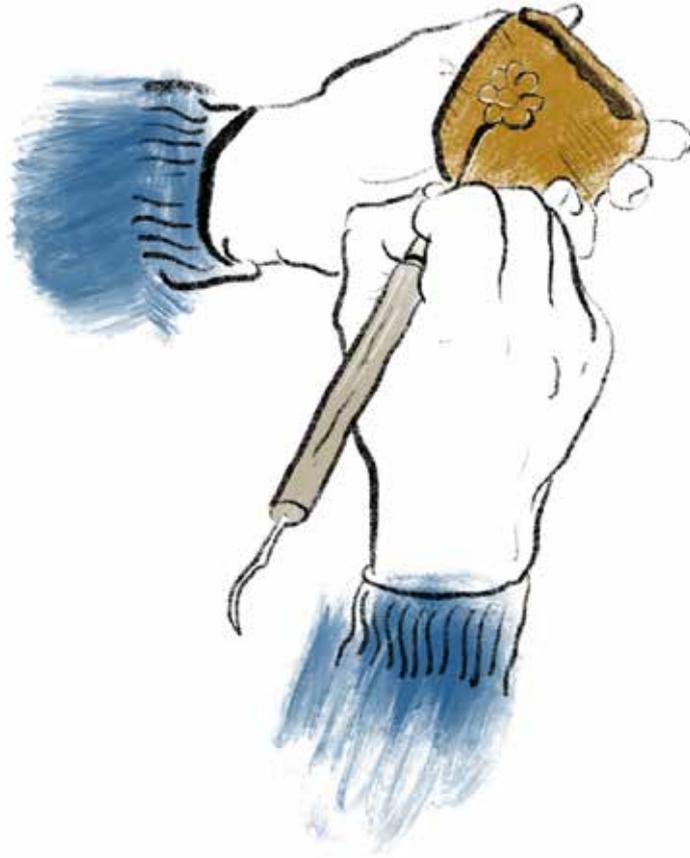
Hang the bag/bundle somewhere the water can drip out and the clay can start to dry.

Clean up and wait:

Depending on the quantity and temperature this could be anything from a few hours to a few days. You'll know the clay is ready when it has become a workable solid.



CREATE



MATERIALS

Clay

Tools for mark making & shaping

(can repurpose collected rubbish & found objects)

Small bowls of water

Sponges

Newspaper

Molds / rolling pin (if tile making)

Wipe cleanable work surface

CREATE



STEPS

Free form:

Play with the clay, making any idea that comes into your head.

How does the clay respond - what will it / won't it do?

How does the clay feel - how does its texture and temperature change as you work with it?

Tiles & mark making:

Use a pre-existing tile mold to create uniform tiles or use a rolling pin and cut out tiles to size.

Using collected found objects and natural materials, experiment with making different marks and impressions on the clay tiles.

Keep these as samples to refer back to.

Handbuilding:

There are three essential handbuilding techniques to play with: pinch pots, coil building & slab building.

Try making a small pot using each of these techniques.

Which technique do you enjoy most? Why?

What other forms can you make using these techniques?

Drying:

The drying process is critical to your final piece's ability to survive the fire.

Experiment working with your piece at different stages of the process...

Wet: fresh malleable clay, all contact will leave an impression.

Leather hard: more solid clay, with a leatherlike appearance but still some plasticity, ideal for carving / attaching.

Bone dry: much lighter clay in colour, solid but fragile, no plasticity and ready to fire.

Remember:

All pieces need to dry gradually and thoroughly throughout to prevent breakage.

The humidity / sunlight / temperature of the drying space will all have an impact.

You can keep pieces indoors / in the shade / under a plastic bag if you wish to slow the process down.



FIRE



MATERIALS

Clear outdoor space for making fire

Matches

Natural firelighters: wax, vegetable oil soaked newspaper

Tinder: dry leaves, dry bark, wood shavings

Kindling: small twigs and branches

Fuel wood: larger sticks, medium-large logs

Clay pieces for firing

FIRE



Steps

Consider the space / time available:

Is your outdoor space appropriate for making a fire - with an open patch of bare earth and a clear surrounding area (away from bushes, trees or anything that could catch aflame)?

Do you have enough hours free to tend to the fire and keep watch, so as not to leave it unattended?
Are you willing to tend, coax, talk and sing to your fire to keep it going?

Gather:

Gather your fire materials, collect twice as much as you think you'll need!

Make a small fire:

Lay your tinder in a small bundle on the ground and use your kindling to build a small nest above. Light your tinder and gradually add more kindling, then fuel wood, as the flame catches.

Heat the clay pieces:

Start heating the pieces through by placing them in a large circle around the fire.

Keep building up the fire, meanwhile rotating each piece 45 degrees every few minutes.

Pieces need to heat through consistently to avoid breaking (they will break if one part is significantly hotter/colder than another) so it's essential to keep rotating the pieces.

Use sticks to turn and move the pieces to protect your hands!

Once the fire is well established, let it start to die down and gradually start moving the pieces in (whilst still rotating them), reducing the size of the circle to bring them closer to the fire.

Add the clay pieces:

Once the fire has died back to hot coals, push the pieces in and onto the coals, making sure all the pieces are fully within the base of the fire.

Rebuild the fire:

Use more kindling to encircle the pieces in the coals then build the fire up to a high heat.

If you're able to glimpse a piece in the fire, it should be glowing red and cooking away.

The pieces need to be cooked through for at least a couple of hours so keep feeding the fire.

After a couple of hours at a high heat, let the fire start to die down.

The pieces can be left in overnight and fished out of the embers in the morning.



SHARE



Some concepts to hold in mind in creative facilitation.

Respect for place:

To only ever take what we need from the earth and not in excess, and to leave a place in a better state than we found it. Clearing up rubbish found on the way to/from the site can be a way of creating an exchange between the earth's resources and our own. See what other types of exchange or care your group might come up with that can then be incorporated into the activities (e.g. tool cleaning, tidying the workspace, etc.)



Non-expertise:

To celebrate experimentation and creative learning. Though they may take years to master fully, these techniques are simple and satisfying for beginners. The beauty is in the experimentation so, if you're new to this, surrender to being a novice and enjoy the process. This may help place facilitators and participants as equals who are learning together.

Non-attachment:

To focus on process over outcome. Working with clay gives us a perfect opportunity to practise and develop non-attachment. Clay responds as a living material, that you can guide and be guided by. Even once hardened, pieces may not survive the fire or may come out differently to how you'd hoped. It's a good reminder to stay present and let go of expectations. One way to play with this is to give each participant a ball of clay and 5 minutes to make anything they want with it. When the 5 minutes is up, have them pass their piece to the person on their left, who will then continue working it. Repeat this until the pieces have circulated a good few times round the circle and then feedback as a group on the collaborative process and pieces created.

Co-learning:

To prioritise peer to peer learning. What knowledge and experience do the participants already have and how can they best share this with the group? What can you, as a facilitator, learn from the participants? How can you create as inclusive and safe a space as possible for everyone to learn together?

SHARE



TEND

A few practical tips to ensure thoughtful practice.

The site:

When harvesting clay with a group, locate a harvesting site beforehand and run through the whole process before doing it with others. Think carefully about the workspace you will bring the clay back to - do you have enough space for participants to work safely? Do you have the right materials and enough for all participants to join in? Do you have somewhere to store the clay and dry pieces?



Task sharing:

Think about the different roles and responsibilities participants could take on to help sessions run smoothly. For example, for the firing session, who will collect firewood / look after the fire / turn the pieces / tell the stories? For the harvesting session, who will carry the wheelbarrow / hold the rubbish bag / check we're not over-harvesting? This works particularly well with children as a way to honour different skill sets and introduce collective responsibility.

Accessibility:

Have you ensured the session is welcoming, safe and accessible for all participants? What are the needs of your group and how can you best cater to them? Are there any psychological or emotional factors you need to be aware of? What health and safety issues might come up? Is your language and delivery considerate of everyone attending? Do you need support facilitating and, if so, who might be able to help?



SHARE



Explore

Ideas for deepening the experience and introducing sensory exercises.

Sound:

When going to source the clay, consider doing so in silence, asking the group to pay attention to all the sounds they hear in the environment and whilst digging/processing the clay. This could form part of an experiment in deep listening, or you could do a simple sharing circle at the end to feedback.

Touch:

This is such an incredibly physical process - invite all participants to get involved with each stage, touching the clay and processing it with their hands. Teaching the sausage test can be a good way of getting everyone to play with the clay and start feeling for qualities like plasticity and resistance.



Very Sandy



sandy



sandy Loam

Sight:

One way to draw attention to a sense is to explore what it's like without it. Ask participants to close their eyes when you first give them some clay to play with. Give them 5 minutes or so to form something without looking. Ask them to describe the clay before and after they open their eyes. How do their descriptions change?



LoAM with
lots of silt



A mix of CLAY
and LoAM



clay

Taste / Smell:

Geophagia is the ancient and ongoing practice of eating earth and other soil-like substrates. This may be a step too far for your participants but many landworkers swear by smelling earth and compost as a way of telling how good the quality is. And of course, there's the connection to food, with both clay and food coming from the ground underneath our feet. How can you bring these associations into a session?

Free form:

Before sharing any specific techniques, encourage participants to get to know the material and tools through play and their own exploration. Mark making on clay tiles is a great way to do this, as is the eyes-closed activity described above. You can also encourage participants to make their own tools repurposing rubbish and found materials.

SHARE



Expand

Broader themes to incorporate into sessions or longer term projects. The appropriacy of these will depend on the group and the site context. Ideally group discussions will inform and lead the direction to take sessions in.

Process:

The more meditative activities outlined in the 'Explore' section above could be expanded upon, focusing on a different sense each session and encouraging participants to approach the clay from that direction - what happens when they work with clay primarily guided by one sense?

Technique:

Each of the stages from the 'Create' handout could be expanded into its own complete workshop, giving more time and attention to mastering the techniques of pinch pots, coil binding and slab building.



Earth-to-table:

Clay and food are biologically, historically and practically connected. These sessions could be expanded into a longer-term project combining making and growing, where participants create their own vessels and are involved in cultivating the food to fill them with.

Clay in context:

How can a making space become a holding space for deeper and broader conversations about craft, our relationship to land and our responsibility as makers and humans? Which conversations would your participants like to use this space for and how can you best support these?



THANK
you

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May it be passed on
and on again

For more information on this project, alternative techniques
and further reading, please visit
cultivatingseeds.blog