

Chapter 1

Stocking a Safe and Efficient Work Area

In This Chapter

- ▶ Assembling your equipment and supplies
 - ▶ Preparing your workspace
 - ▶ Making candles safely
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Making candles can be a relaxing and rewarding hobby. Nothing quite compares to the feelings of pride and pleasure that come from looking at a beautiful, burning candle and knowing that you created it with your own two hands.

Because today's supplies and materials make creating attractive candles easy, you don't need to purchase them. And because candle making isn't an expensive hobby, you can decorate your home with candles, as well as give them as gifts. (See Chapter 9 for more information.)

I get you started off on the right foot in this chapter by explaining what you need, from basic equipment to everyday supplies. I also tell you how to prepare your workspace so that you have minimal cleanup and how to safely melt wax and transform it into candles.

Stocking Up on the Basics: Equipment and Supplies

Making candles doesn't have to be expensive. You can use many items that you already have at home, or you can buy them cheaply at garage sales. If you do need to buy anything at a store, you can almost always find coupons for it in your Sunday newspaper. If you don't have what you need on hand and don't want to drive to stores, you can also order what you need via the Internet. (For suppliers, see Appendix A.)



I suggest getting only the barebones equipment when you start out. As you venture into the hobby more, you get a better feel for the types of candles you want to make and the equipment you need.

To help you get started, the following sections walk you through the basic equipment and supplies required to make candles.

Lining up your equipment

What you're basically doing in candle making is melting solid wax over your heat source. So the first item you need is some type of heat source. Your stove, of course, is perfect for this function, but some people use a small camping stove. In fact, it doesn't matter whether your stove is gas or electric.



Don't use a microwave to melt your wax because the temperature is too hard to control, and you can easily overheat the wax.

Finding your (melting) pot

After you have a heating source, you need something to melt your wax in, a melting pot, if you will. Wax heats up quickly and can explode if it gets too hot, which is why you almost always must use an indirect method of melting it. In other words, don't melt your wax in a pot directly on your burner. Instead, you need some type of double boiler system (see Figure 1-1). A *double boiler* is basically a large pot with a smaller pot inside.

Figure 1-1:

You need a double boiler or some type of improvisation to melt your wax. A small pot, mounted on a trivet inside a larger pot, works just fine.





If you don't have a double boiler (preferably metal), don't think that you have to rush out and buy one. I personally don't have a double boiler. You can use a small pot placed inside a larger pot to get the same effect (refer to Figure 1-1). The small pot needs to be propped up in some way so that it doesn't rest on the bottom of the larger pot. You can use a *trivet*, a three-legged stand that slightly lifts your pot or, if you don't have one, several small tin cans resting on the bottom of the larger pot. You want the top, smaller pot to be at least $\frac{1}{2}$ inch above the base of the larger pot. I didn't have any pots that I wanted to melt wax in, so I just bought some cheap ones at a garage sale.



You probably are pouring your wax from the top pot into your molds (unless you're dipping your candles). A *mold* is simply a hollow object into which you pour your melted wax; as the wax cools, it hardens and takes on the shape of your mold. Craft stores have metal melting containers with a handy little pour spout. As I became more involved with this hobby, I purchased one of those containers, which made cleanup and pouring a whole lot easier.

Collecting the necessities

When you have your heating source and double boiler out of the way, you're ready to get some other necessary items, including a

- ✓ **Mold.** Your first candles probably are ones you make in a mold. The type of material your mold is made of doesn't matter. In fact, you have many mold options, from store-bought ones, to molds you recycle from items around home, to molds you make yourself. Chapter 3 offers you a wealth of information on molds.



My only suggestion here is to wait before you buy a lot of molds. Just purchase a few basic ones at first to get a feel for what you like. Then, after your creativity is stimulated, you can probably find many additional mold options around your home that you can use for free.

- ✓ **Thermometer.** You can purchase a specialized wax thermometer or use a candy or cooking thermometer as long as it has the appropriate temperature ranges on it. You want the thermometer to register temperatures ranging from 100°F to 300°F.



I can't stress the importance of a thermometer in candle making enough. Don't even try to make candles without one, because it's too dangerous! (See the section "Playing It Safe" later in this chapter for other safety tips.) Wax gets hot quickly, and unlike items you cook, you can't eyeball wax and know by sight that you've overdone it. The only way to properly guarantee the temperature is with a thermometer.



You can find thermometers that attach to the side of your melting pot. Check your local craft store, cooking store, or online candle-making resource. (For a list, see Appendix A.)

- ✔ **Dipping can.** If you're going to be dipping taper candles (see Chapter 5 for the technique), then you want some type of metal container that's wide enough and tall enough to dip your wicks into (see Figure 1-2). Of course, you can purchase these cans, but you can also use something from home. You may not even need to purchase or find another container if your melting pot is at least 12 inches wide. You can just use it to dip your candles.
- ✔ **Ladle or large metal spoon.** As the wax melts, you need to stir it occasionally. A ladle or large metal spoon works well. As long as you don't leave the spoon in the wax mixture, you can even get by with a long-handled plastic spoon, which is easy to clean and doesn't absorb wax or scent. (The likelihood of melting increases when you're working with gel wax, which requires a higher melting point. To find out how to make a gel candle, see Chapter 8.)

If you look at the preceding list, you can see why making candles is so inexpensive.



Figure 1-2:
For dipping
tapers, you
need some
type of a
dipping can
that's at
least 12
inches wide.

Adding other helpful items

Of course, if you like gadgets, you can always find more equipment to spend your money on. As you continue making candles, you may want to buy some of the following items. None is mandatory, but these items may make your candle-making adventures more enjoyable.



- ✓ **Kitchen scale:** You may want to weigh your wax and wax additives to ensure that you're using just the right amount for consistent results, but you certainly don't have to. (You add wax additives to alter your candle's appearance or burning time; see Chapter 2.) If you melt too much wax, you can just recycle it to use later (see Chapter 2).

If you do opt for a scale, a digital postal scale is much more accurate than a spring-type diet scale, especially for weighing additives and fragrances, but they do cost more money.

- ✓ **Baking pan:** You can clean your molds and other equipment in many ways, but I suggest using an old baking pan lined with aluminum foil. Just be careful with your molds because if you use too high a temperature or heat them for too long, it may begin to melt away. For more details on cleaning methods, see Chapter 3.

- ✓ **Scissors, razor blade, or craft knife:** Sharp tools enable you to trim your wick and cut your wax. Because I hate sharp things, I find that scissors work just swell for me.



When you cut off the amount of wax you need from your block of wax, make sure that you have something underneath it so that you don't damage your countertop.

- ✓ **Hammer and/or screwdriver:** Sometimes you need to break your slabs of wax apart, depending on their size. You can place a screwdriver in the wax and hammer the end of it to make the job easier. Again, place a protective surface, such as a cutting board, on your countertop before hammering — unless you don't mind the possibility of a gouge in your countertop from a slipped hammer or screwdriver!

Other items you may want on hand include measuring cups and spoons, extra spoons if you want to add fragrance or dyes (see Chapter 6), and possibly a tape measure if you plan to measure your candle mold or finished candle.

Gathering your supplies

I consider *supplies* anything that you need to replenish after you start making candles. That includes candle waxes, wax additives, and wicks. Those items are so important to candle making that I devote Chapter 2 to waxes and wax additives and Chapter 4 to wicks.

The following are a few other supplies you need:

- ✓ **Mold sealer:** You may also hear *mold sealer* referred to as *wick sealer*, and the latter name gives its function away: You use it to close up the hole where you thread in your wick so that the wax doesn't leak out.
- ✓ **Releasing agent:** You may also hear a *releasing agent* referred to as a *mold release* (see Figure 1-3). You can purchase silicone spray specially formulated as a releasing agent at any craft store, or you can raid your

kitchen and use everyday vegetable oil. The latter works just as well as any releasing agent I've ever purchased. All you do is spray or apply a thin amount of spray or oil to the inside of your mold so that you can remove your candle easier.

- ✓ **Wax glue:** If you decide to get decorative with your candles, you may want to purchase wax glue so that you can attach embellishments or pieces of wax to the sides of your candle. For more advanced projects and decorative finish ideas, see Chapter 7.
- ✓ **Wick tabs:** If you buy untabbed wicks, you may want to purchase *wick tabs*, which are thin metal bases that attach to the bottom of your wick. (Untabbed wicks are simply wicks that don't have the tabs.) These tabs are usually used for votives and container candles because the bases help support your wick so that it stands up straight. You can also use them for molds that don't have a hole in the bottom for the wick because they help your wick stay at the bottom of your candle when you pour the wax. (See Chapter 4 for more tips on working with wicks.)

Accuracy counts

One of your most valuable tools in candle making is an accurate thermometer (see figure). You can purchase a wax thermometer from a craft store or make do with a candy thermometer, as long as it gives the correct temperature range. It doesn't matter what type of thermometer you get as long as:

- ✓ It's accurate.
- ✓ It lists temperatures in both Fahrenheit and Celsius.

- ✓ It gives temperatures up to 300°F.
- ✓ It doesn't melt.

Just as in cooking, whenever you're gauging temperature, you need to wait until the thermometer stops rising to read the temperature. When you're purchasing your all-important thermometer, make sure that you purchase one that does not contain mercury.



Figure 1-3: Spray your mold with a releasing agent so that your finished candle is less likely to stick to its mold.



If you're going to go beyond making basic candles, you may want to purchase supplies that enable you to color and scent your candles. Wax dye, which you use to color your wax, comes in a variety of forms, including powder, liquid, and solid chips. You can also add fragrance using essential oils, synthetic scents specially formulated for candles, and herbs. Chapter 6 gives you all the details about buying dyes, as well as essential oils and readymade candle scents.

Getting Ready for the Dirty Work: Preparing Your Workspace

If you've ever had a burning candle drip on your carpet, then you know how difficult removing wax from things you don't want it on can be. As a result, make sure to prepare your workspace so that you're not stuck ending an afternoon of candle making with the unpleasant task of scraping wax off your countertops and removing stains from your clothes.

The kitchen is the best place to make your candles simply because that's the most likely place for your heat source, the stove. The following steps explain how to prepare your work area:

1. **Choose an area near the stove where you have enough counter space to work.**

You need to be able to arrange all your supplies nearby, as well as have enough room to work. The closer you are to your heat source, the better off you are.



2. **Line your countertop with aluminum foil, wax paper, or even an old dropcloth or sheet.**

Someone may have suggested that you use newspaper to line your countertop. Don't! Although newspaper is indeed an inexpensive alternative — especially if you subscribe to a daily one and you're going to toss it or recycle it anyway — the heat from the wax may cause the newsprint to get on your countertop.

If you're using aluminum foil or wax paper, turn up the edges at least an inch to prevent runoffs from leaky wax.



3. **Tear off a few extra sheets of foil or paper.**

You can always use extra foil or paper, so have it ready now, before you need it. For example, after you pour your wax into the mold, you can use these extra sheets to place your mold on for extra coverage.

4. **Get out anything else you may need, based on the project you're making.**

You can use your time better by having more out than you need rather than wading through drawers looking for something as your wax is heating. Good items to have on hand include potholders, and paper towels. And just as you would when making a recipe, also make sure that you read through the project you want to make and get those supplies ready now as well.



Okay, I don't want to be an alarmist, but having a fire extinguisher on hand is a good idea, too. Not that you'll need it, but you know what they say: As soon as it's not around, you will!

Believe it or not, you also want to get dressed for the occasion. Didn't know candle making had a dress code, did you? Although you don't have to wear a specific candle-making uniform, you do need to put a little thought into what you're wearing. Wear something that you don't mind getting a little wax on — forget your favorite jeans and sweater — and be extra safe by wearing an apron. If you do get wax on your clothes, see the section “Treating spills,” later in this chapter, for tips on removing it. You may also want to avoid wearing clothes that shed. You don't want your candles to have a little extra fur, do you?



Just as with anything else, continual maintenance is better than a major overhaul. In other words, clean up your mess as you make your candles so that you won't have a bunch of work facing you when you're finished. You can find the equipment and supplies you need a whole lot faster, too. Plus, if you don't have that extra can or container in the way, you're less likely to dump it over!

Playing It Safe

Whenever you work with anything hot, you need to take the proper precautions. I suggest wearing thick potholders whenever you're removing your double boiler from the stove, as well as when you're pouring your wax. The following sections also give you valuable safety information for when you're heating wax, treating spills, or putting out a fire.



Don't overlook eye protection. Safety goggles can go a long way in protecting your eyes from splashes. And if you find yourself making lots of splashes, you may even want to consider wearing long sleeves and pants.

Heating wax

Unless you're rolling beeswax candles (see Chapter 2 for more on beeswax and other types of wax), you have to melt your solid wax into liquid wax. You don't want to get your wax too hot, though, or it may combust, causing fire. (For more information on heating wax, see Chapter 2.)



Never leave your wax unattended as it melts. If you see smoke, you know you're in danger of a fire. Immediately turn off the heat.

When working with hot wax, don't be tempted to save time and melt your wax over direct heat or in a microwave. Using a double boiler slows the heating process and helps ensure your safety. However, you can't think you're safe just because you're using a double boiler. Just as when you're boiling eggs, you need to make sure that you have enough water to cover most of your top pot.



Be especially cautious when melting gel wax. Gel wax has a higher melting point than other waxes and is quicker to catch fire.

Treating spills

Whether you spill wax while you're making candles or while you're burning a finished one, cleaning wax spills is no treat. The best course of action is obviously prevention. Taking the time to prepare your workspace for candle making can save you valuable minutes of cleanup and maybe even articles of clothing. In addition, if you've properly matched your wick to your wax (see Chapter 4) and you haven't placed your finished, burning candle in a *draft* (a slight current of air, such as from a window), you won't have to cope with big accumulated pools of melted wax that can spill.

But alas, despite your best intentions, wax is now somewhere that it isn't intended to be. Perhaps the wax is on your floor, your carpet, your clothes, or yourself. Whatever your predicament, the following tips can help you clean up the mess.

- ✓ **No matter what type of wax you spill on you, the basic treatment is the same.** (If the burn causes blistering, definitely call your primary care physician or visit your local immediate care center.)
 - Immediately place your injured part in cool water. (Don't use cold water because extreme temperature shocks your skin.)
 - When the wax cools and hardens, gently peel it off and treat it like other any burn. (If your skin didn't blister, you can use calamine lotion or aloe vera. But, whatever you do, don't use butter!)
 - If you spill melted gel wax on you, the gel is hard to get off your skin. The longer it stays on, the more it continues to burn.
- ✓ **If the wax gets on something other than your body, wait until it hardens before you try to clean it up.** Otherwise, you are just spreading the goo and making a bigger mess. If you want to speed along the process, try rubbing an ice cube on the wax to help cool it. If the item is movable, such as clothing, you can even place it in the freezer.
- ✓ **After the wax hardens, try to scrape up what you can.** A wooden spatula works particularly well. But be careful not to scratch the surface if the wax is on something hard, such as flooring or countertops.
- ✓ **If your spill is on your carpet or clothing, scrape up what wax you can and then cover the area with paper towels or newspaper and iron over it.** You need to keep replacing the paper towels or newspapers and ironing the spot until the wax disappears (see Figure 1-4).

If this method doesn't remove the wax from your clothes, try taking them to the dry cleaner. Their special chemicals can often remove wax from fabric. Just let them know what they're dealing with when you drop off the garments.
- ✓ **If your spill is on wood, scrape it off.** If you have any left, then use wax cleaner to mop it up.



You may not be able to remove wax from porous material, such as unfinished wood, unglazed tile, or concrete.

Extinguishing a fire

Unfortunately, mishaps occur. Hopefully, a fire won't be in your future — and it shouldn't be if you're checking your temperature — but just in case it is, I want you to be prepared.

Figure 1-4:

You can usually remove wax from your carpet by using a warm iron and paper towels or newspaper.



Turn off your heat source immediately if any of the following occurs:

- ✓ You check your wax's temperature, and it's dangerously high (anything over boiling point, which is 212°F).
- ✓ Your wax begins to smoke.
- ✓ You smell something burning.
- ✓ Your wax actually ignites and catches fire.

I can't stress enough that you may have no signs of an impending fire. You won't see bubbles, such as when you boil water.



If you think you're in danger of a fire, don't try to move your pan. A fire may occur at any minute, and you don't want to take the chance of spreading it or spilling dangerously hot wax everywhere.



Wax is actually oil, so never pour water on it in an attempt to put it out. If a fire occurs, you need to actually smother the flames. You can use a metal lid, damp cloth, fire blanket, baking soda, or an extinguisher — just not water!

After you've eliminated the fire, don't touch the pan right away. The pan is hot. When it's cooled down, you can clean up just as you would any other fire — air out the area, throw away the pan after it cools, and call a fire repair company if the damage is severe.

