



Soap: A History

Since a simple soap is made from so few ingredients, it is difficult to determine when exactly soap was invented. Some evidence traces soap back 5000 years ago when Sumerians would boil ashes together with animal and vegetable fat to make what they called “slurry”. Other evidence of soap can be traced back to 1500 B.C., when alkaline salts mixed with oils were found on Egyptian papyri.

Before the 18th century, soap was considered a luxury because only the wealthy could afford it. Soap had a bad smell because scents had not yet been introduced. Since it had a bad smell and was so expensive, few people purchased it.

By the 19th century, mass-producing and branding soap became very popular. One company, Proctor & Gamble (P&G) realized the importance of branding their products and the need to advertise these brands. The more time and money the company put into their advertisements, the more their soap sales skyrocketed.

Traditionally, making soap took a year’s worth of preparation. Ashes from the fires would be collected over the winter and used to make lye (a strong alkaline, typically sodium hydroxide in soap). There would also be a designated soap pot that all leftover fat, grease and lard were kept in.

To make a simple soap you will need:

- 1 cup melted beef fat
- 2 tablespoons of lye flakes
- ½ cup of cold water (rain water)

Begin by lining a pan with either factory cotton or Vaseline. Then, prepare the lye by mixing it together with a ½ cup of cold water,

stirring continuously until the flakes have dissolved. Try to do this at an arms length to avoid breathing in the fumes from the lye. Use a meat thermometer to monitor the temperature of the lye.

Put the melted fat into a pan and set another thermometer in it to monitor the temperature of the fat as well. Once the lye has reached between 90-98°F, and the fat reaches a temperature between 120-125°F, add the lye to the fat mixture. Stir this new mixture constantly. After a little while, the mixture will begin to thicken.

Once the mixture reaches a consistency that is similar to muffin batter, pour into molds and smooth the top of each one. Cover the molds with a towel and let them set for 2-3 hours. Next, cut the soap into bars and re-cover for 24 hours. After that, remove the bricks from the mold and stack them to air dry. You need to wait 3-4 weeks before using the soap, as this is the curing period.

