

Ingredients:

Basic Gingerbread House Cookie Dough:

2 cups shortening
4 sticks (1 pound) unsalted butter
14 cups bread flour, plus more for dusting
2 cups sugar
1/3 cup ground ginger
3 1/2 tablespoons ground cinnamon
1 tablespoon fine salt
3 cups dark corn syrup
2 1/2 tablespoons pure vanilla extract
Plain flour, for rolling out the dough
One recipe Royal Icing (recipe follows)
Cornflour and vinegar or icing sugar, to thicken Royal Icing
Candy for decorating, optional
Special equipment: printed templates or ruler and triangle, assorted cookie cutters, 1 1/2-inch circle cookie cutter, piping bags with medium and fine tips

Royal Icing:

2 pounds icing sugar
1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons meringue powder (egg white powder)
Food colouring, as desired

1. For the gingerbread birdhouse: Melt the shortening and butter together in a medium saucepan. Let cool. Sift the flour, granulated sugar, ginger, cinnamon and salt into a large bowl. Mix the melted butter into the flour mixture with an electric mixer until sandy. Add the corn syrup and vanilla, and mix until evenly incorporated, but still crumbly in texture. Press the dough together by hand and divide into 8 equal parts. Press into rough squares about 1-inch thick. Wrap in plastic and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or overnight. Place the dough on top of a flour-dusted sheet of parchment. Roll a square of dough about 1/4-inch thick and into an 8- by 11-inch rectangle. Repeat with all the remaining squares. Stack them up and refrigerate until firm, about 30 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, click [here](#) to e-mail a link of the template to your desktop or laptop computer for printing. Print the file at 100-percent on letter-size paper and cut out the pieces. Remove the top sheet of parchment from the dough. Lay the templates on the rolled dough slabs and cut out all the pieces with a long, sharp knife or pizza cutter. (You will have a total of 8 cut panels plus 3 extra sheets for cookies. Cut out the remaining dough with cookie cutters of your choice.) Use a 1 1/2-inch circle cookie cutter to cut the hole for the door opening into one of the tall walls. Stack panels on a cookie sheet and chill 45 minutes to set.

3. Preheat the oven to 175°C and position the oven racks so they are evenly spaced.

4. Bake the gingerbread shapes until they are a rich tawny brown, 25 to 30 minutes. Cool on a rack. With a fine kitchen rasp, file the panels to make all the edges straight.

5. Thicken about 2 cups of the Royal Icing with either cornstarch and a couple of drops of vinegar, or confectioners' sugar, to get the consistency of caulk. Fit a pastry bag with a medium round tip and fill it with the thickened icing. Pipe a generous amount of royal icing along the bottom and the sides of a short wall. Center the wall of the base $\frac{3}{4}$ inch from one edge. Use a box or can to help support the walls while they dry. Pipe royal icing along the bottom of a tall wall, and stick it to the base with an edge pressed against the icing on the first wall. Repeat with the remaining two walls in the same manner until the four walls are up, making an open box with a $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch border all around the base. (The two tall walls will face each other.) Allow the icing to dry completely, about 24 hours, before attaching the roof.

6. Ice the sloped edges on one side of the house and attach the big roof piece. (Line up the top of the roof with the peaks of the tall walls.) Use a box or can to prop up the overhang of the roof while it dries in place. Attach the smaller roof piece on the other side of the slope (prop it up with a box or can) leaving the same amount of overhang. Leave the top open for now. The last roof panel is the lid and will go there when all is dry. Pipe royal icing neatly on the outside of the seams to secure them, and allow the house to dry for 24 hours.

7. Fit tips into piping bags. Divide the remaining royal icing into batches and colour as desired. Fill bags with the icing and decorate the house and roof with icing and candies if using. Allow to dry. Fill the house with cookies. Rest the remaining roof slab on the house to make a lid. Enjoy.

Royal Icing:

1. Combine the icing sugar, meringue powder and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup water in a large bowl. Mix slowly with an electric mixer until stiff enough to form peaks; the icing should be pure white and thick, but not fluffy and bubbly. If the frosting is over beaten, it will get aerated which makes it harder to work with. If this happens, let the frosting sit to settle, and then use a rubber spatula to vigorously beat and smooth out the frosting. Add up to 1 tablespoon food colouring and mix with a rubber spatula until the colour is uniform. Gels are best with royal icing. You don't want to thin them with liquid colours. Be careful of adding too much colour, which reduces the sheen of the frosting and can break down the consistency of the frosting over a couple of days. Store the icing at room temperature, covered, with plastic wrap on the surface.

Yield: 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups