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Shine on in winter's dark days with ice candles



Colleen Smith, Special to The Denver Post

The Northern European tradition of making ice candles brings light to the darkest days of the year.

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In the dead of winter, ice candles add life, grace and luminosity to the darkest days of our year. This northern European tradition combines the opposing elements of fire and ice for a serene and beautiful effect illuminating walkways, wintery yards, porch ledges and patio tables.

The ice candle custom originated in Finland, according to Juha V. Mäkikalli, Colorado's Honorary Consul of Finland and dean of the Colorado Consular Corps. The first use of the frozen luminarias wasn't decorative, though.

"I have seen ice candles used for any sort of special occasions, but it may well be that some of the early uses occurred at the graveyards," Mäkikalli said. The tradition of burning candles at graveyards started in the early 1920s and became more common during and after World War II. "The ice candles became common practice in the 1940s, initially to honor dead soldiers."

Like a hurricane lantern, the ice vessel protects the candle flame from harsh winter winds.

"On the gravesites, the significance of the ice candle is that you are bringing something alive, in a sense, with the flame burning," Mäkikalli said.

Eventually, the ice candles celebrated not only death, but many merry occasions of life.

Ice candles stoked the imagination of the Finns, and the practice radiated beyond cemeteries into the dark months of winter; Finland's capital, Helsinki, is in the southern region but lies on the same latitude as Anchorage, Alaska. Now, for example, the ice candle custom is especially popular for Finnish Independence Day, Dec. 6.

"We celebrate with them at Christmas, but the use of candles goes on through the winter months," Mäkikalli said.

"Winter is a dark time of the year. We have only about four or five hours of true daylight, so any light in that season is pleasant," he said. Finns use candles in wintertime a whole lot more than is typical in the U.S. — indoors and outdoors — just to bring warmth and light into the dark season."

Finns also often put candles outside to welcome guests in the winter.



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Ice candles can light walkways for your guests at a winter fete or bring cheer to a backyard.

“Some line the driveway with ice candles, and on the porch we have lanterns or long-burning outdoor candles. The same indoors as well.”

Mäkikalli has never made ice candles, but as a boy he created a variation on the theme. “I was born in the mid-’60s, and as a kid, we would make little lanterns out of fist-sized snowballs. We would add a cone structure and inside, put a candle and light it. It was the easy way to do something similar, and they could last quite a while.”

How to make ice candles

Ice candles are one way to warm up to winter’s coldest temperatures. Commercial kits are available, but when the deep freeze hits, all you need are plastic buckets and water.

I began crafting the candles — often called Scandinavian ice candles — as a way to lure myself outdoors on the coldest days of the winter. Now, I can find something positive about sub-zero temperatures I once cursed. Ice candles inspire me to leave the warmth of the hearth and take in some natural light that helps counter Seasonal Affective Disorder from dampening my spirits during the short days of winter.

- **Collect plastic containers.** Five-gallon buckets are ideal for traditional Finnish ice candles. Restaurants, construction companies, painters might donate used buckets, or you can purchase them at a big box store. Five-gallon buckets are cumbersome, so if lifting weight is an issue, use smaller containers. For unusual shapes, try plastic wastebaskets in various shapes and or sizes. Keep in mind that expanding ice can bow the bottom of metal containers, so don't use pails, pots or buckets that you don't want ruined.
 - **Wait for a cold snap.** When the mercury drops low, you'll have the highest success rate. Temperatures must be below freezing, obviously, and zero degrees Fahrenheit or lower works best.
 - **Fill containers with water.** Allow a couple of inches at the top for ice to expand.
 - **Clear ice is elegant,** but a few drops of food coloring will tint the water and therefore the ice. Pale blue ice brings to mind glaciers. Pink is perfect for Valentine's Day.
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Add food dye to the water before you freeze it to give ice candles a hint of color.

- **Leave buckets outside** in the cold for eight hours or more. The longer you leave containers, the thicker the ice walls. Yet you don't want the bucket to freeze into a solid block of ice, which I've done accidentally with smaller buckets. The ice freezes from the bottom up and from the outside in. The thickness of the ice is not always evident. I've broken many when the ice walls were too thin.
 - **Bring it in.** To "birth" ice vessels, bring buckets of ice indoors for at least 10 minutes to allow them to thaw slightly. This allows the ice pull loose from the sides of the bucket so the ice will easily release.
 - **Head back out.** Here's the tricky part. Decide where you want to situate your ice candle because they're heavy, slippery and not easy to move. Working close to the ground where you plan to leave your ice candle, tip the bucket and carefully allow the ice to slide out. This can happen very fast. Wear gloves for grip and to protect your hands from the cold water. You might have to break a few before you get the knack of easing the ice out of the bucket in one piece. That's okay: it's only frozen water. Once the ice is out of the container, you can tip the ice vessel to pour out the remaining water. Or bail out the water using a smaller bucket.
 - **Take care** not to dump water onto sidewalks or other paths that will create a hazard if icy. Working over a lawn is ideal because the water will more readily absorb. Waterproof gloves work well to protect hands, and you'll want to be careful about getting your feet soaked with icy water, too.
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- **Add a candle** to the center of the ice vessel with open end up. This project is a perfect way to use up half-burned candles you already have on hand. If purchasing new candles, bear in mind that the tea lights in metal will melt holes in the bottom of the ice vessel. Target sells affordable pillars, or check discount stores. For best results with candles, keep wicks trimmed to a quarter inch. Allow new candles to burn for several hours to allow the flame to widen the circumference in the wax.
 - **A strand of cordless lights** also looks beautiful in the ice vessels.
 - **Group ice candles** for maximum impact. Line a walkway, a porch ledge or stairway to set the stage for a party or just as a way to cozy up to winter's cold.
 - **To help ice candles last longer**, place them in the shade. In coldest temperatures, the ice appears clear as glass. How long the ice lasts depends on the weather, but ice candles are pretty even as they melt and grow translucent. The ice holds light and looks lovely by day, too.
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