

reclaiming clay

by Mea Rhee

This approach to reclaiming clay ensures that it never becomes too big of a task. All you need is a mid-sized bucket on wheels, pan-sized plaster slabs, and bit of monitoring to keep your slop under control.



Most wheel-thrown pots require trimming to finish their shapes. Trimming generates piles of small, leather-hard clay scraps. I like to recycle them back into workable clay. One of the common reasons I hear for not reclaiming clay is that it's too much work. It really isn't! Here's how I do it.

The Process

Take note of the size of my slop bucket (1). Working with small batches makes this process easy and to aid in mobility, the bucket is on wheels. This bucket holds about 40 pounds of clay, and I fill it every two or three weeks.

Clay trimmings go in the slop bucket, along with throwing water, plus the sludge that collects in it (2). This is an important component of reclaiming. Wheel throwing will remove more fine particles from your clay than large particles. These fine particles end up in your throwing water or in your splash pan, and all of this material needs to be reclaimed, in order to maintain the composition of your clay.

I keep an eye on the slop bucket every day and manage the moisture level. Do I need to add or remove water? Should I cover it with plastic? I try to keep the liquid level just below the solids level, knowing the solids will absorb the liquid in a few days. Monitoring the condition of the reclaim means that when the bucket is full, the slop will hopefully be soft enough to scoop but stiff enough to hold its shape (3). Sometimes I need to wait a few days for the right consistency to develop. A bamboo rice paddle is the ideal tool for scooping.

You do not need a big and heavy plaster table for the next step. I build a stack of alternating plaster slabs and clay slop (4). I used 9x12-inch foil cake pans to make these plaster slabs. A stack of six of them is enough to process 40 pounds of clay.

The plaster draws water out of the clay. And, as the plaster becomes damp, it keeps the clay evenly moist. The clay will reach a throwable consistency in about 24 hours. Wedging or pugging it so that the consistency and moisture level are homogenous is the last step.

Benefits of Reclaimed Clay

I purchase 3000 pounds of new clay per year. I reclaim 500 to 600 pounds per year; this equals 20% more clay that otherwise may have gone to waste. But, here's the most important benefit for me. I make the reclaimed clay softer than new clay. I can pug new clay together with reclaimed clay, which makes my throwing clay nice and soft. This is much easier to throw for a full-time potter, in terms of wear and tear on my joints. It means I can throw more pots per day, which is good for the bottom line. And, in the long term, it means I can work as a potter for more years.

the author Mea Rhee lives and works in Silver Spring, Maryland. To see more of her work, visit www.godelephant.com.

1 The ideally sized slop bucket on wheels. It holds about 40 pounds of clay. **2** Leather-hard trimmings, plus throwing water and its sludge, are added to the bucket. **3** With some daily monitoring of the moisture level, I aim to create a full bucket of slop that is soft and scoopable. **4** The slop is dried out to a workable consistency by stacking it between plaster slabs.

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