Merry Christmas!

Mrs. Kuechle's kindergarten class made and then decorated gingerbread houses last week. That got us thinking that decorating gingerbread houses might be a fun family activity during the Holidays. The key is to build the houses the day before, glue them solidly together with royal icing, and then let them set overnight. Have fun!

Eileen Dockendorf, Watkins

Make your own Gingerbread House

1. Make a plan. Just like building a real house, you need a plan for what it will look like. You'll need measurements, too.

2. If you want to do it "old school," make your construction-grade gingerbread dough. Roll it out, and cut it to the shapes and sizes you'll need for the house you've planned.

3. OR just use graham crackers. To cut and/or shape graham crackers for gables, etc., score the cracker along the cut line and then snap it – much like you would do with ceramic tile. Cut and lay out your graham crackers pieces according to your plan.

4. Use an empty 8-oz. milk carton, a cracker or cookie box, or canned goods to support your gingerbread house as you assemble it. If using a small milk carton, you can "glue" the pieces directly to the carton. Otherwise, you'll want to carefully apply royal icing to the joints of your walls, using supports to hold them while they dry; once all four walls are up, you can add your roof pieces, gluing all the joints with royal icing.

5. Apply a good amount of royal icing to the outside of all the joints: at the peak of the roof, all four corners of your house, and where the roof meets the walls.

6. LET SET AND DRY OVERNIGHT. A wet gingerbread house will collapse once you start adding more frosting and decorations. Make your house(s) ahead for yourself and/or your guests.

7. Gather together your possible decorating items in separate dishes. Prepare frosting (or use canned) and/or fondant for fancier decorating. Lay out your decoration dishes and sprinkle jars so they're easy for everyone to access and use.

8. Let the decorating begin (the next day). Stir up the royal icing before using so it's soft and sticky. Use the royal icing to attach candies, cereal, or other decoration pieces to your gingerbread house. Make a "pile" of royal icing for snow, or "drips" of it from the roof for icicles.

9. Remember that there's no right or wrong with decorating your gingerbread house. The goal is to have fun!

Timothy & Trudy Maurer, Kimball

ROYAL ICING

3 large egg whites
4 3/4 cups powdered sugar
1/2 tsp. cream of tartar

DIRECTIONS:
In a large clean bowl, beat egg whites and cream of tartar with electric mixer at medium speed. Add powdered sugar in small amounts, mixing well on high speed after each addition. Beat on high speed 4-5 minutes or until mixture thickens. Refrigerate, covered, until ready to use. You may need to stir icing to soften before use.

For best results, use a pastry bag and a writing tip to apply royal icing. Alternatively, you can use a zippered plastic bag and snip off one tiny corner, squeeezing out the icing through it.

GINGERBREAD

(Search online for a gingerbread house recipe – more sturdy than for cookies – or use this one from *foodnetwork.com*.)
1/2 cup (1 stick) butter, room temp.
1/2 cup dark brown sugar
1/4 cup light molasses or dark corn syrup
1 Tbsp. cinnamon
1 Tbsp. ground ginger
1 1/2 tsp. ground cloves
1 tsp. baking soda
2 cups all-purpose flour
2 Tbsp. water

DIRECTIONS:
In a large mixing bowl, cream together the butter, brown sugar, molasses, spices, and baking soda, until the mixture is smooth. Blend in the flour and water to make a stiff dough. Chill at least 30 minutes or until firm.
Preheat oven to 375° F.
Cut out paper patterns for the house template. Roll out the dough onto rimless cookie sheet, then cut pieces according to the pattern pieces (use a sharp knife, or pizza cutter). Remove the excess, but leave the house pieces on the sheet. Bake at 375° F for about 15 minutes, or until dough feels firm. Let cool before assembling.

EV-W Superintendent Mark Messman lent his 8 years of experience in sealing up gingerbread houses to Mrs. Kuechle's class last week. Principal Rob Pedersen, with 13 years of experience, also helped to "caulk" the gingerbread houses.

The class's gingerbread houses, all ready to set overnight. It's best to be sturdy and solid before decorating, so the structure can hold up the weight of more royal icing with candies and other decorations. This is the 23rd year that Mrs. Kuechle has made gingerbread houses with her class.

Possible gingerbread house decorations

candy canes
peppermint candies
M & M's
Reese's pieces
Skittles
gumdrops
spice drops
Dots
spearmint leaves
orange slices (candy)
Hershey kisses
Twix bars
Ande's mints
Red Hots

SweetTarts
jelly beans
Sixlets
Mike & Ike
pastilles
nonpareils
licorice, Red Vines
cotton candy
Smarties
candy hearts
chocolate Santas
KitKat
jawbreakers
Jordan almonds

candy tape
Fruit roll-ups
mini Reese's peanut butter cups
candy rocks
Gumi bears
Swedish fish
Whoppers
chocolate coins
Junior mints
lollipops
Lifesavers
ribbon candy
hard candy

rock candy

<u>Non-candies</u>
shredded coconut
Wheat Chex cereal (esp. for roofs)
Cheerios
mini cookies
sanding sugar
sugar pearls
dusting of powdered sugar (for snow)
drips of royal icing (for icicles)

chocolate (cinnamon, vanilla, or mint) chips
sprinkle-on confetti cake decorations
pretzels, mini-pretzels
square or round mini-pretzels
animal crackers
mini Ritz crackers
dried fruit
nuts
popcorn
Pepperidge Farm Milano cookies

Pirouette cookies
sugar wafers
butter cookies
shortbread cookies
cinnamon sticks
graham crackers
chocolate graham crackers
gingerbread cookies
sugar cookies
Rice Krispie treats
mini marshmallows
melted chocolate
peanut butter