

The Building Blocks of Incense

A WORKBOOK FROM THE
HAND-CRAFTED INCENSE
WORKSHOP SERIES



THE NORTHWEST SCHOOL OF
AROMATIC MEDICINE



Anyone can learn to make their own incense at home, and it can be as simple or complex as you want to make it.

But before you embark on this aromatic journey, there are fundamental principles and a certain level of understanding that must be in place to ensure your incense making endeavors are to be a success.

One of the biggest challenges that novice incense makers face...

...is investing considerable effort, time, and resources into crafting an incense blend, only to have it not turn out the way they'd hoped. This can lead to frustration and even thoughts of giving up on the craft...



...Their incense falls apart, doesn't hold its shape, ends up not smelling as good as they expect, ends up not burning properly, or worst case scenario, it won't even stay lit for more than a few seconds!

These issues are incredibly common, and there's a real shortage of resources providing comprehensive guidance on the fundamental building blocks of incense.

Until now...

In this guide, I'll be sharing with you **the 4 Elements of Incense** which encompass the various materials necessary to craft a strong, combustible, and consistently burning incense.

With this knowledge you'll be well-equipped to create incredible and effective blends for health, ritual, or enjoyment.

THE 4 ELEMENTS OF INCENSE

#1 - Base Materials

When making incense cones, sticks, or other types of *shaped* incense, the first component you need to know about are base materials.

Bases are botanical powders that make up the bulk of an incense blend – essentially serving as its foundation. These are most often fragrant hardwoods or other types of wood, roots, or barks, that play multiple roles in an incense blend.





Combustibility

Base materials are essential for ensuring that combustible incense, such as sticks and cones, burns completely. Without any base material, your incense won't burn properly.

If you use base materials but don't get the ratio right, your incense cones may only burn partially before extinguishing.

Achieving the correct balance of base materials to other ingredients is crucial, and this ratio can vary depending on the specific blend and various other factors.



Fragrant Foundation

Most base materials emit a subtle, pleasing aroma that enhances the overall fragrance of a blend. These materials typically release a heavier, sweeter 'base note' scent when burned, creating an ideal canvas for the other aromatic ingredients to blend seamlessly.

Common base materials in incense crafting include wood powders from aromatic trees such as Sandalwood, Agarwood, Cedar, Juniper, and tree barks like Makko powder.

Summary: Base materials facilitate the independent burning of formed incense and impart a rich, sweet underlying aroma that enhances and unifies the overall fragrance.

#2 - Aromatics

The next components in an incense formula are a diverse range of aromatic botanical materials found around the world.

Today's vast selection of aromatics offers incense crafters virtually endless possibilities for creating unique scent combinations, whether for pleasure, ritual enhancement, or medicinal purposes.

These aromatic plant materials encompass a variety of types, including **woods, barks, roots, seeds, leaves, needles, flowers, certain fruits, resins, and gums.**

Each type has its distinctive properties, some with specific applications and unique methods of incorporation into incense blends. Within these groups are numerous materials that act very differently from one another.





There are certain materials that hinder the burning process of cones and sticks when used in excess, and there are those that support it...

...The goal is to find a balance with these materials. For example, using too much of a certain variety of plant material such as Frankincense resin, will cause a cone or stick incense to not burn properly or thoroughly.



Resins, gums, fruits, waxy foliage, certain oil-dense woods, and other materials simply aren't combustible on their own, so they must be balanced with a material that is combustible to make sure an incense blend burns just right.

Understanding how to create a well-balanced blend consisting of the proper amounts and ratios of different aromatic materials is a crucial skill to learn as an incense crafter.

Summary:

Aromatic materials found in the plant kingdom are used in incense for their fragrance and medicine to create a fine-tuned aromatic profile, particular therapeutic quality, or certain ritualistic atmosphere.

#3 - Binders

Binders are what hold everything together in an incense blend.

When it comes to crafting formed incense, such as cones and sticks, natural binders play a vital role as the 'glue' for incense crafters. Various liquid or powdered gums, resins, viscous plant extracts, and select bark materials serve as binders in nearly all types of incense, including many loose incense formulations.

In certain incense types, like nerikoh and loose incense, even ingredients like honey can serve as binders while infusing a sweet note into the overall aroma.

Binders are the key to creating and maintaining the solid shape of incense cones and sticks over time. Achieving precise ratios and amounts of binders is a fundamental aspect of successful incense crafting.



Excessive binder can affect or prevent burning altogether, while too little can result in a fragile structure, resulting in crumbly incense that doesn't hold up well.

The secret lies in striking the perfect balance with the unique blend of materials at hand. With practice, this skill can become second nature.

Common binders include tragacanth powder, honey, guar gum, xanthan gum, melted tree resins, plant gums, and makko powder.

Summary: Binders, typically sticky plant extracts or other materials, solidify the shape of incense. Activated by heat or water (depending on the binder used), they act as a glue when dried or cooled.





#4 - Water

Water gives rise to form, synthesizes ingredients, and brings life to a blend.

Whether crafting sticks, cones, or loose incense, water activates gum binders, shaping and solidifying the incense.

Beyond its physical role, water holds spiritual significance for many incense crafters and medicine makers, infusing synergy and magic. Many cultures traditionally recite prayers, songs, or mantras during the addition of water, infusing positive energy and intentions into their incense.



When added to the dry ingredients of a blend, water also activates the aromatic medicine of the plants on multiple levels.

Water also unlocks aromatic properties in plants. In some cultures, liquids like perfumes, attars, hydrosols, and essential oils substitute or complement water.

Summary: Liquids, particularly water, mix ingredients into incense dough, create forms, activate gum binders, and are traditionally used in countless incense cultures to infuse prayers and intentions to enhance spiritual and medicinal effects.





In the world of incense crafting, we have four fundamental elements: Bases, Aromatics, Binders, and Liquid or Water.

Understanding the unique qualities of each of these elements and finding a harmonious balance among them is essential in your crafting journey.

So far, you've learned the significance of having a solid base material as the foundation of your incense formula. You've explored the diverse aromatic materials that constitute the heart and soul of a blend.

You've recognized the necessity of using natural binders to maintain your incense's shape. And you've learned how water and other liquids come together to harmonize and activate the ingredients.

You now possess awareness of these building blocks. **However, to truly succeed in creating incense that burns flawlessly and retains its form, you'll need to understand how they synergize.**

Next Up...

In the final lesson of this series, I'll guide you step-by-step through the process of crafting your own great-smelling, well-formed incense.

You'll gain insights into every stage, from raw ingredients to the finished product. *Plus*, I'll share my simple recipe and help you with sourcing your ingredients so you can craft my blend at home effortlessly.

Soon, you'll be creating incense that not only delights the senses, maintains its integrity, and burns perfectly but also instills a sense of fulfillment and confidence in your work.

You'll have the means to craft incense for friends and family, whether for ritual, meditation, or pure enjoyment. For aromatherapists, herbalists, and other healers, this journey will add an ancient aromatic healing dimension to your practice, deepening your holistic approach and helping your patients address various physiological, psychological, emotional, and spiritual concerns.

I know you'll love the final lesson of this series.

See you soon!"

Evan Sylliaasen

