YOU ASKED FOR IT!
COOKIE DECORATING FAQ
You Asked for It: FAQ

Didn’t know you asked any questions? Let me back up. In an effort to make my new book *Ultimate Cookies* as practical as I hope it is inspirational, I turned to my Facebook fans for input about midway through the project. I asked one simple question: what’s your biggest cookie decorating conundrum? And, wow, what a response! While the number of queries was initially overwhelming, I quickly discovered common themes and concerns, even common decorating mishaps. After a little boiling down, the many emails reduced to the following few questions. Here, you’ll find my short answers. And, of course, you can always find the long versions in my book!

But, before we get into the nitty gritty, special thanks go: to Jane Bonacci, Carolyn Lawrence, Debbie Lynskey, Kathie Reuter, Joanne Shellan, and Robin Traversy for posing some of the tougher questions, and to Nancy Lee Quist and Sally Rue, from fancyflours.com, my wonderful book tour sponsors. You’ll find the most lovely cookie decorations, anywhere on this planet, on their site!

**Q:** Cookie decorating takes time, yet the cookies need to stay fresh. How do you plan ahead, especially when making a large number of cookies, so everything isn’t done at the last minute and the cookies taste their best?

**A:** Large runs of decorated cookies can definitely be challenging, but if you’ve planned well, freshness shouldn’t be an issue. I start by making the dough a week or more in advance; then I freeze it until the day before I plan to bake. My rolled cookie doughs will stay fresh in the freezer with minimal to no loss of flavor for at least a month. I prefer not to freeze baked cookies, because they soften and never taste quite as fresh. (They also occupy too much freezer space). And I never, ever freeze already iced cookies, as the icing invariably spots or discolors upon thawing.

I also generally work my baking and decorating into no more than two days, partly because I’m vigilant about grouping like-tasks. For instance, I mix all of the icing colors upfront; then I apply one icing color at a time to all of the cookies to minimize the swapping out of pastry cones and bags. (That is, provided the cookie decorating technique I’m using allows me to do this. With marbling, for instance, all of the icings need to be applied at the same time.) If you’ve truly got a massive cookie run, then enlist friends or employees to help with the less mission-critical tasks, such as mixing, rolling, and cutting the dough, and focus your efforts on the decorating. Divvying up the tasks and working in assembly line-fashion will speed up the process.

**Q:** Once I’ve taken the time to decorate the cookies, how long can I expect them to stay fresh?

**A:** The length of time a cookie stays fresh depends on the cookie type and how you store it. My rolled cookies will generally stay fresh and crisp about a week or longer, provided you store them in airtight containers at room temperature as soon as the icing is completely dry. Never box the cookies when the icing is wet. The icing will take much longer to dry, and in the process, the colors may bleed or mottle and the cookies may soften. And don’t commingle different cookie flavors in the same box. It won’t take long before they taste very similar!

**Q:** Are all of your cookies decorated with royal icing or are some done in buttercream or other icings?

**A:** Yes, Royal Icing (my recipe is in the book and on my site) is my preferred decorating medium for rolled cookies. Buttercream (such as my Italian Buttercream, also in my book) is great on cakes and as a
filling for sandwich cookies, but it’s not suitable for icing rolled cookies because it doesn’t set up and
eventually softens the cookies. Royal Icing is made with egg whites, which cause it to harden quickly to a
crunchy candy-like coating. And because it dries fast, cookies iced with it stay crisper and can be stacked
sooner. Colors are also less likely to bleed.

Q: When I make royal icing, I beat the ingredients until stiff white peaks form, but can you over-beat
the icing?

A: I think so. I find that the icing gets too air-filled and bubbly if I beat any longer than 2 to 3 minutes,
especially if the icing is loose. Once introduced, bubbles are hard to work out of the icing – and who
wants a bubble-pocked top coat?! For best results, mix Royal Icing to a thick “glue”-like consistency
(generally 5 whites to 2 pounds of powdered sugar) and just until the icing turns very white; then thin it
as needed.

Q: My biggest problem is that I never quite mix the icing to the exact color I had envisioned. What is
your secret to achieving a beautiful color range and perfecting the desired shade of color every time?

A: Although soft-gel food coloring (what I recommend for tinting Royal Icing) comes in nearly every color
of the rainbow, getting the right color can still be tricky. This is because Royal Icing will dry darker than it
appears wet, and some colors, such as red, are notorious for drying much darker than others. To make
sure my colors end up looking as I envision, I usually paint a “test palette” on a piece of cardboard and
let the colors dry about one half-hour – all before applying the icings to cookies. After I see the true (dry)
color, I adjust the color, if needed.

I typically limit color mixing to adding just a few drops of black or brown to tone down very
bright colors, or a few drops of yellow to brighten dull ones. I’ve found that, once I start mixing more
than two to three colors together, the colors have a tendency to separate and migrate upon drying.

Q: I have a pretty good handle on the right icing consistency for top-coating cookies, but getting
the right icing consistency for decorating the top coats is harder. What do you suggest?

A: Great question! There is an ideal icing consistency for every decorating technique, from outlining to
beadwork to marbling, and so on. If the icing isn’t behaving as you’d like, then chances are you haven’t
mixed it to the proper consistency for the task at hand. In my book, I give consistency adjustments for
each of my decorating techniques; some adjustments are also provided alongside the Royal Icing recipe
on my site. Just remember, these adjustments are guidelines only. The actual amount of water needed
to thin the icing will vary with the initial thickness of the icing, which depends on beating time, normal
variations in egg size, and other factors.

Q: When you add water to thin the icing to other consistencies, do you beat it in with an electric mixer
or just gently mix it in? When I beat the icing with an electric mixer, it seems to get too light, almost
foamy.

A: You’re right; it does get foamy, especially when relatively large quantities of water are beaten in to
reach flooding consistency, for instance. Bubbles are a bear to eradicate once you’ve got them in the
icing, and can really interfere with achieving smooth top coats. After I’ve mixed Royal Icing to its initial
“glue”-like thickness (above), I always dispense with the electric mixer and do any further consistency
adjustments by mixing in the water by hand. I introduce far fewer bubbles this way.
Q: When I add food coloring to icing of flooding consistency, the color looks less even than when I add it at thicker consistencies. What’s going on here and when should I add the food coloring?

A: I can’t explain the science behind what’s happening, but I too have noticed that coloring tends to distribute less evenly in loose icings. Icings that have been tinted after thinning also tend to dry with more mottling and spotting than do icings that are tinted when thick and then thinned. To avoid spotting, I always tint my icing at “glue” consistency, then thin it gradually, just until it reaches the optimum consistency for the technique at hand. I’m also careful to air-dry cookies in a warm, dry place to speed drying time and minimize color migration.

Q: How long do I need to let border icings dry before I can flood another icing inside the border? And how long does that flooding icing then need to dry before I can apply icing on top of it?

A: The answer to the first part of this question depends on the colors you’re putting next to each other. If the colors are highly contrasting, such as a black outline next to a light flooding color, it’s best to allow the outline to dry until it is dull and hard, to minimize the chance of colors bleeding. However, if the colors are the same or very close in hue, you can outline and then flood almost immediately.

As for when to add details on top: this answer depends on the details you’re adding and, again, their color. For instance, if you’re stenciling or laying wafer paper on top, two techniques that require direct application of pressure, I recommend drying the icing overnight to be sure it is solid all the way through. Conversely, if you’re using the wet-on-wet layering technique, then you should apply the icing right away so it sinks into the flooding icing. But, be warned, there’s greater risk of colors bleeding with this technique -- and when any highly contrasting color is applied to a flooding or top-coating icing before it has crusted on top.
For more tips, and cookie projects like the one above, check out:

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