



Polymer Clay Beach Pebbles

Maria Jam Brown's
Technique

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My favorite aspect of polymer clay is that it gives you the ability to mimic the look of a variety of materials: leather, turquoise, woodgrain, silver, porcelain...you name it! I've had a lot of fun experimenting with these types of faux surfaces. I had an idea to create something out-of-the-ordinary and unusual as an adornment, and the challenge for me was to keep it 'real-looking'- sort of a 3D trompe l'oeil out of clay. I decided on beach pebbles. In the beginning, I just wanted to see if I could make some realistic-looking pebble beads, and the process turned into a satisfying, creative project.

There are very few tools involved, and no sanding (unless you want a polished look). These pebbles rarely turn out 'wrong' because there are so many varieties and imperfections in natural stone. Plus, it's a lot easier to make a hole in a polymer clay 'rock' than a real one!

You'll need:

- Some beach pebbles to study
- A shallow dish with water
- Polymer clay in several colors
- Scrap clay or lightweight clay
- Aluminum foil (optional)
- Assorted spices, garden soil, and/or a teabag
- A blade for chopping, such as a tissue blade
- Pasta machine (optional)
- Any piercing awl
(whatever makes a hole in your beads)
- A bead rack or piece of cardstock for baking
- An oven dedicated to baking polymer clay
(or equivalent)



Choose the Ordinary. Go to the beach and borrow a few ordinary-looking smooth-ish pebbles. I say "ordinary" because if you're like me, your eye will find the crazy-colored, unusually-shaped stones that don't look like typical beach pebbles. You may be able to duplicate these exactly, but they will end up looking like 'fantasy rocks', not real rocks. Gather enough 'template' pebbles for a variety of textures and colors, maybe ten to twenty.

Wet Rocks Work Best. Rinse your pebbles and place them in a shallow, water-filled dish at your workspace. I've found wet rocks reveal their colors and texture better than dry ones.

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Step One - Color. Concentrate on color first. Study your template rock. Select marble-size lumps of similar colors from your stash and start blending. When you mix and smush your clay blend(s) and you think you have a good color match (or two) to your template rock, mix in a pinch of white or ivory into each color. Most clay will darken during baking, and this step can save you some frustration! Roll the clay into a ball to form your pebble. If you have more than one color blend for your pebble, mix these colors (not too well- you want them to look natural) and form your pebble. If you want very large pebbles, you may want to make a core from garbage clay, lightweight clay or a wad of crumpled aluminum foil. Flatten your colored clay blends with your fingers and cover the core. Gently roll and smooth the edges. (Rolling too much will create a swirl pattern that you may not want on your pebble.)

For Banded Rock- Cut your pebble into two pieces to mimic your rock's banding. With your fingers, shape a flattened disc of your banding color and 'sandwich' it between your two halves. Gently press your clay halves back together. Try mixing in some translucent clay to your band color for realism. For rocks with lots of striation, repeat this cutting and sandwiching process until you're satisfied.

For Agate- Make your pebble, usually white or off-white color with maybe a bit of pink or coral or gray streaks. Then cover it with a thin sheet of translucent clay. On my 1-to-7 Atlas pasta machine (Number 1 being thickest), I'd use a 5. Gently roll the translucent clay-covered pebble so there are no obvious seams.

For Speckled Granite- Choose four or five colors that make up the speckle pattern in your template rock. (Around the Puget Sound, this is commonly black or off-black, a few shades of gray, off-white, and a dark, muted pink.) Add a little black pepper (optional) and chop them all up together very fine, but don't smush the colors together. When you're tired of chopping the colors with your blade and you think it looks good-- chop some more. I can't stress this enough-- learn from my impatience! The finer you chop, the more real it looks. The chopping is done when the pieces resemble the size of the speckled color on your template rock. Create a ball (your pebble's core) of garbage clay and gently press it into the chopped mix. Cover the core completely with the little chopped pieces and gently press (don't roll!) them together until you form a slightly bumpy veneer of 'granite' on your core. Go to Step Three.

Step Two- Texture. Study your template rock and your lump of colored clay together. Does the rock have impurities and texture that your clay doesn't? Experiment with crushed tea leaves, sifted soil from your garden and your spice cabinet.



Press a little into your clay surface. I've had good luck with ground oregano, ground black pepper, crushed poppy seeds, and tea bags. If your rock's texture is a little bumpy, try pressing table salt into the surface in a random fashion. Or press in sea salt or rock salt if it's really bumpy. The salt will rinse away after baking, leaving a rough and pitted surface. Very cool.

Step Three- Shape. Few rocks are perfectly oval, so this part is easy. To create flat-ish sides, drop your clay pebble on your work surface from a few feet up. Smooth any obvious angles with your fingers. Think of your pebble's intended use and how you want it to hang, where you want the hole, etc. This helps me to decide how I want to shape my clay pebbles.

Let Them Rest. Set your clay pebbles aside and let them cool down/ firm up for a few hours, overnight is ideal. It will be easier to pierce stringing holes and you'll be happier with the results. If you intend to slice them in half (instead of string them) and glue them to something- like a picture frame or a vase- this cooling step is even more important.

- Bake them on a bead rack or piece of cardstock according to the clay manufacturer's directions, about 15 minutes for every 1/4 inch of thickness.

The best 'test' of your pebble-making success is to mix your baked clay pebbles in a bowl with the template pebbles. Can you tell the difference? No? Congratulations!



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