# Home Clay Studio II

This is a continuation of the Home Clay Studio Basics and will be useful for people with more space or a separate dedicated work area. If you have a dedicated room or building it may be helpful to have studio shoes that stay in the studio as well as door mats to keep the clay dust in the studio. In considering a space, think about how you will bring in water (no need to have it right there), your clay, and any other supplies or equipment. Do you need a heated space so you can work when it is cold out? How will the environment influence the clay drying (blowing heater every 5 minutes or a still and damp basement)? It should be a space you *want* to be in and which allows you to pay attention to your work. Consider windows, lighting, wall color, environmental sounds, sources of distractions, and sources of inspiration.

As you work with clay you may generate **scrap clay** that you will want to reuse. There are two general approaches to this. One is to dry it out, the other is to keep it wet. There are benefits to both.

1) **Dry it out**. As you work you will have cut-off pieces, trimmings, or just failed pieces that you can allow to dry and store as dry clay for as long as you wish. You can keep it in old clay bags, buckets, or even boxes. When you are ready to reuse it you will put it into a full bucket of water, or just a few inches above the clay scraps. Ideally the clay should be in small chunks, less than an inch thick. If the clay is bone dry, the clay will absorb water quickly and evenly, and will break down within 24 hours. You will then have a very consistent smooth slip to dry out for wedging. This is the easiest way to mix different clays. The big problem is that you have to manage a very dusty and hazardous material. Therefore, it is best done outside with a mask. It also might leave you with the habit of waiting too long and storing a lot of clay that will be a major undertaking to process.

   **A note about masks**: The most appropriate mask to use is a half face mask with HEPA filters (the pink ones). These are made by a number of different companies, come in different sizes, and can be found at most hardware and home improvement stores. They all offer the same level of protection if fitted properly. The soft, rubber-like material should seal on your face with minimal pressure and the seal should not break when you move your head around. Other kinds of filters can be attached for different conditions, but the pink HEPA filters are for dust. The mask can be cleaned with the filters removed, and can last for years. The second best kind of masks are paper N-95 masks. These offer less protection, but are adequate for most conditions. They are intended for a single use, but may last for a few light uses. Do not use the paper comfort masks (with only a single strap), as these are not adequate.

2) **Keep it wet**. As you work and generate scraps, put them in an old clay bag or bucket with a lid and give them a spray from your spray bottle. The idea is to rehydrate or keep your scraps at a wedgeable consistency. At the end of the day, or periodically, you will

want to wedge the scraps into a usable state to be used the next time you work on a project. This process keeps you up to date with your reclaim, so you are only storing clay that is ready to use. This is a bit more work, as the clay is usually too dry or has an uneven consistency. Dry clay can be packed into a mass by dropping it on your work table. Then it can be sliced like bread with a wire tool. The slices can be sprayed or dipped in water and the mass restacked. In a little while the water will have mostly absorbed. Check it again. If it is too dry, repeat the process by cutting across the previous slices.

I usually use this approach at home. All my throwing slurry and scraps go into a five gallon bucket by my wheel. The trimmings and any other dry scraps go into the bucket. I also scoop off good water for throwing at the beginning of the day. By the time the bucket is full, the clay is fairly stiff and only needs a bit of drying before it is wedged. A full 5 gallon bucket will hold about 50 pounds of clay. The clay in the bucket can mold if it is kept too long. The mold is not good to breathe, but it will make your clay more plastic. It will become inert when it is dry and will burn off in the kiln.

3) **Reclaim your clay**. To reclaim your pile of wet clay slop, you will need to dry it somehow. The most common practice is to have a slab of plaster to dry the clay on. Dry plaster will absorb water from the clay, then it can be peeled up and wedged. It is important not to get any plaster dust or pieces into your clay. Plaster will expand when heated in the kiln and can pop pieces of clay off your work. Plaster slabs can be purchased from some clay suppliers, but you can modify the size and shape.

   Plaster comes in a number of grades. The most porous is also the weakest, and the strongest is the least porous. Number one potter's plaster (or the equivalent) is usually used by potters. Plaster of paris is softer,  but may be easier to find at hardware stores and can work for this purpose. Though not as effective at drying, a tile backer board is a more durable option. You can also use a slab or a large bowl of bisqued clay. Bisqued clay will absorb water well and any clay debris will not harm your pots. You may already have this on hand.

4) **Wedge your clay.** When wedging clay, it is helpful to have a very sturdy, low table with a porous top. Ideally the table will be up against an outside or wall or load-bearing wall for stability. The table should be lower than your waist to allow you to use your body weight to wedge, not just your arms. A good height will let you keep your back straight and your arms long, in order to rock your weight forward from your feet to compress the clay. A common way to get a porous table top is to stretch it with canvas. This works, but is hard to keep clean and always seems dusty. I prefer a hard surface that is easy to wipe off. A piece of smooth tile backer board or MDO can be attached to an existing table. Tile backer board is brittle, so it needs the support of other material under it (like your table top) and some brands may have too much texture. MDO (Medium Density Overlay) is a plywood with a skin of very smooth wood fiber. It is made for cabinets and

can be found at the large DIY stores. This is strong and gives you a slightly porous surface that is easy to clean.

5) **Cut-off wire**. Many potters find it convenient to have a wire mounted to their wedging table. The wire is run from approximately 18 to 24 inches above the back of the table to the front edge of the table, forming a triangle with the table top. The back support can be wood or a pipe that runs up one of the back legs or it can be surface mounted to the table top using a flange. It is a good idea to use a turnbuckle to tighten the wire and a short heavy spring to lighten the shock on the wire when it is used.

6) **Storing your clay.** Clay can be stored in heavy bags like the ones your new clay comes in. These are often closed with a twist tie, (though MN Clay does not do this). Clay may also be stored in plastic containers or buckets with tight-fitting lids. Clay will eventually dry out even in these conditions, so it should be checked about once a month. Giving it a spray will usually keep things stable, but you may have to slice and wet your clay if it is getting too stiff (see #2). Most boxed clay will be fine to store for at least 6 months from the manufacture date. Your reclaimed clay will not hold its moisture as long.

7) **Shelving.** If you are working on more than a few pieces you will need storage shelving or ware racks to hold your finished and in progress work. What you will use is dependent on your space, the kind, size, and quantity of your work. Regardless, you will want something sturdy, as clay is very heavy. It is also best to have something you can clean easily. Rolling racks and/or wire shelving may be good for some uses. A variety of shelf spacings or adjustability helps with storage efficiency. Think about how you will be working and what will allow you to move the work easily and safely. It is usually best to have a system that minimizes the numbers of times you have to touch the work. If you are throwing quantities of similar size pieces it is common to have a long, narrow ware board to place the work on as you go. Length can vary, but you want to move your body to get a new board at least every hour, so not too long. The boards can be slid end wise onto a rack system, so the board is held by two cross supports. Wareboards can be stored in any number of other ways as well.

   If you need to keep work at a stable moisture level, or really slow down drying, you may find a **damp box** to be useful. This can be as simple as covering your shelves with plastic sheeting so that you don't have to wrap each piece individually in plastic. It also could be an air tight cabinet with a bin of wet plaster on the bottom shelf to keep the moisture level high. If you are assembling work from multiple pieces that take awhile to make, you can use a plastic storage bin with a well-fitting lid. Pour 1 to 2 inches of plaster in the bottom. Once it has set and dried, you can re-wet it to keep the moisture level high in the bin. Work can be made and placed in the bin over many days or weeks until you are ready to assemble them. It is best if the clay work does not sit directly on the plaster (a piece of bubble wrap can help).