

Hair Braiding with an Oatmeal-Box Braiding Stand

By Ruth Gordon

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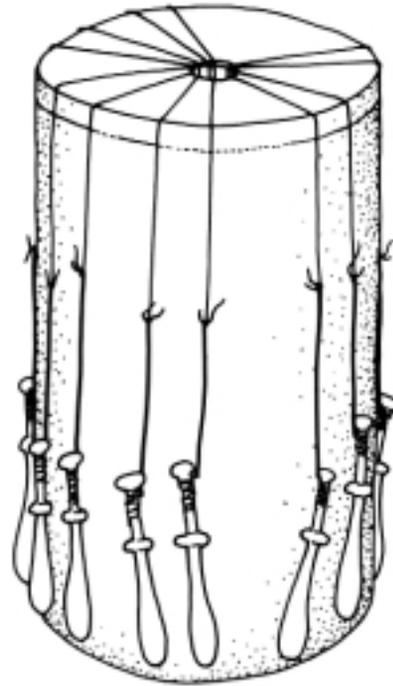
Because the equipment for hair braiding is specialized, Ruth Gordon offers inexpensive and commonly available alternatives as a way to experiment with the technique before you invest in more supplies. Unlike a traditional braiding stand, the oatmeal-box stand is limited in the number of bobbins and length of braid that can be comfortably handled on it. Ruth recommends that you limit your first braid to no more than thirteen bobbins.

MATERIALS

- Large, empty cylindrical oatmeal box, 42 ounces (1.19 k)
- Compass or American quarter
- Small craft knife or sharp-pointed scissors
- Bobbins (see Bobbins and Weights below)
- Counterweight (see Bobbins and Weights below)
- Scale calibrated in 1-ounce or 25-g increments, such as a kitchen or postal scale
- Piece of cloth about 7 inches (17.8 cm) square, or a small drawstring bag
- Human hair or horsehair for braiding, at least 7 inches (17.8 cm) long
- Alligator or binder clips, to equal the number of bobbins in your braid
- Cotton string or heavy crochet thread, 1 ball
- Paraffin wax, 1 bar
- Double boiler for melting wax
- Small, shallow dish of water
- S-hook or small paper clip opened out into an S shape
- Ruler
- Flat piece of wood about 1 × 6 inches (2.5 × 15.2 cm)
- Large, shallow flame-proof pan

MAKING THE BRAIDING STAND

Turn the oatmeal box upside down. Draw a circle 1 inch (2.5 cm) in diameter at the exact center of the bottom by drawing around a quarter or using the compass. With the craft knife or scissors, carefully cut out the circle, leaving the edge as smooth as possible.



Braiding stand with hair and bobbins in place ready to braid.

BOBBINS AND WEIGHTS

For improvised bobbins, you may try any of the following: lace bobbins, Shaker pegs (short wooden pegs with a mushroom-shaped head), small wooden spools that are available from many craft stores, or small bolts. Whatever you decide to use, it's important that all of the bobbins be of the same weight. Most of these improvised bobbins are lighter than traditional braiding bobbins. They will be satisfactory for braids requiring only a small number of strands, but more complex braids may require heavier bobbins.

A counterweight is attached to the braid to compensate for the weight of the bobbins arranged around the perimeter of the stand. To calculate the weight of the counterweight, weigh all of the bobbins that you'll be using for the braid and divide the total weight by 2. Your counterweight should be about equal to this weight. Fishing weights make ideal counterweights because they come in a wide variety of weights and have a hole or loop for easy attachment. If you don't have a fishing weight or combination of weights of the correct size, weigh out the appropriate quantity of small, heavy objects such as shot or stones and tie them securely in the square of cloth or a drawstring bag.

PREPARING THE STAND FOR BRAIDING

Cover your work area with a plastic sheet to protect it from hot wax. Place the paraffin in the top of the double boiler and heat it over simmering water until melted. Hot wax is extremely flammable. Never leave it unattended.

Sort the hair into bundles of 12 to 15 hairs each—one bundle for each bobbin of your braid. Place each bundle in an alligator or binder clip and set aside.

Cut a number of 12-inch (30.5-cm) lengths of string equal to the number of bobbins in the braid. Wind a piece of string around one of the bobbins so that you cover the end of the string with subsequent wraps. Fasten the string around the bobbin with a half hitch, leaving about 3 inches (7.6 cm) of the string free.

Take a bundle of hair and dip one end of it in the water. Hold the damp end of the hair bundle and the loose end of the bobbin string side by side with the ends even. Make an overhand knot to join the two together. Tighten the knot by pulling the loop down toward the free ends so that only ½ inch (1.3 cm) of the ends extends past the knot. Separate the hair and string so that they form a continuous strand. Dip the knot into the melted paraffin and set the bobbin and hair aside: Repeat the procedure for each of the bobbins.

Cut a number of 9-inch (22.9-cm) lengths of string equal to the number of bobbins. Take one bobbin with its attached bundle of hair. With wet fingers, moisten the entire length of the hair attached to the bobbin. Trim the free end of the bundle if necessary so that the ends of the hairs are even. Tie a 9-inch (22.9-cm) length of string to the free end of the hair bundle using the same method you used to tie the hair to the bobbin string, taking care to keep all the hairs even. Dip this knot into the melted paraffin. Repeat the process for each bobbin. Lay the finished bobbins side by side in a row with all the knots that you've just made in line. With a 12-inch (30.5 cm) length of string, tie the bundles of hair together just on the hair side of the knots that fasten them to the second (shorter) strings. Make the first part of a square knot but wrap the end twice through the loop before tightening it. Make the second part of the square knot (without the extra wrap). Gather all the second (shorter) pieces of string and tie them together with a single overhand knot. Slip an S-hook or unbent paper clip into the knot.

Holding the knot that ties all the strings together, drape the strings attached to the bobbins over a ruler to keep them in order and carry them to the braiding stand. Place the knotted

bundle of strings into the center hole and hang the counterweight on the Shook.

BRAIDING

Untangle the bobbins if necessary and arrange them around the sides of the stand so that the bundles of hair are lying in the order required by your braid pattern. It may help to make a light pencil mark or place a piece of removable tape on the top of the stand to serve as a reference and arrange your bobbins with respect to this mark. Follow the movements as directed by your pattern, handling the string attached to the bobbin rather than the bobbin or the hair. As you work, the braid will descend into the base of the stand and the lengths of unbraided hair become shorter. Unwind string from the bobbins as necessary, so that they continue to hang at the side of the stand. Continue braiding until the braid is long enough or until you have braided the entire length of the hair.

FINISHING

With a 9-inch (22.9-cm) length of string, tie the bundles of hair together where they meet the braid in the same manner as you tied the bundles of hair before placing the bobbins on the stand. Untie or cut the hair from the bobbin strings. Using the ends of the ties that fasten the bundles of hair at each end of the braid, tie the braid to the flat stick so that the braid is stretched flat. Fill the flameproof pan with enough water to immerse the stick and braid. Place over medium heat and bring the water to a boil. Turn the heat off and as soon as the water stops boiling, place the stick with its braid in the water and allow them to soak for 10 minutes. The braid must be covered with water but not touching the bottom of the pan. (You may leave the heat on under the pan to keep the water hot but do not let it boil.) Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 300°F (150°C).

Drain the water from the pan, remove the stick and braid, and place them in the heated oven for 5 minutes. Remove the stick and braid from the oven and allow them to cool completely before handling the braid. ❖

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