

## RITUAL TOOLS

The important thing to remember about ritual tools is that they're only tools, symbols to help us focus on the intent of the rite. The tools themselves have no inherent power; they are, in effect, sacred stage props. The power of the ritual comes from within ourselves. So if you don't have the particular tool that a ritual calls for, don't panic. You can improvise, or do without.

Still, many of us enjoy working with ritual tools, and they do make it easier to focus, especially for a beginner. Collecting your first set of ritual tools should be an enjoyable experience, but don't go overboard. You don't need everything right away, and you don't need to spend a lot of money. Some of the best ritual tools come from garage sales, flea markets, beaches, and forests.

There's a lot of lore and tradition surrounding ritual tools. Some ritualists will tell you that all your tools must be brand new and/or made by your own hand in a prescribed way; others quite happily find chalices at antique stores and athames in the kitchen drawer. What works for you, works.

If you do buy a tool secondhand, first clean it physically. Then bury it in salt or earth (clean kitty litter will do, in winter) or under salted or running water for at least three days, before taking it out and consecrating it.

Never haggle for a ritual tool. Pay the asking price. If you can't afford it on these terms, don't buy it. And don't use something as an altar tool if it has unhappy connotations for you.

Putting work into a ritual tool helps make it more thoroughly your own. If you can't make it from scratch, maybe you can customize it in some way, by adding engraving or some other decoration.

Once you have consecrated a tool for ritual use, use it only for ritual, and store it apart from utilitarian, everyday objects.

Let's look at the individual tools:

**Athame:** The athame (ath-AH-may), or black-handled knife, is the primary and most personal ritual tool of most Witches. It should fit comfortably in your hand. Most Witches prefer a symmetrical, double-edged blade with a leather sheath, but some are quite happy with a consecrated steak knife.

If the knife you wish to use doesn't have a black handle, paint it. You may also wish to engrave the symbols of your choice on the hilt or the blade. A few athames (very few, but enough to prove there's an exception to every rule about ritual tools) have a non-black handle, usually for some specific and personally relevant reason.

Since an athame is never used for actual physical cutting, some Witches choose to keep the blade blunt, for practical reasons. You can blunt your blade by sawing at a cinder block or paving stone with it.

The athame is the symbol of Air or, for some practitioners, of Fire.

**Sword:** The sword is simply a giant athame. Normally, only high priest/esses and/or coven leaders have swords.

**Wand:** The traditional length for a wand is the distance from your elbow to the tip of your middle finger. You should cut it yourself, from a tree whose permission you have asked (and paid with a gift), or from deadwood which has never touched the ground. Various traditions specify what kind of wood you should use, and what time of day or month you should cut it -- but use what works for you. Some of the best wands I've seen were made of dowelling from a hardware store.

You may wish to carve or paint or decorate your wand. Or you may prefer plain rough bark. You may wish to tip it with a pine cone or with a crystal point of your favourite gemstone, to give it a more phallic shape. It's up to you.

The wand is the symbol of Fire, or for some practitioners, of Air.

**Chalice:** The chalice may be any stemmed cup or goblet, made of whatever material you prefer. In some traditions, your chalice should be a gift from a lover or friend.

Consider the practicalities of the chalice you choose. Pewter and unlined brass or copper are unsafe with acidic liquids such as wine or fruit juice; they'll give you heavy metal poisoning over time. Marble is etched by acid. Silver needs a lot of polishing. Glass is practical but too fragile to travel well. A pretty pastel chalice may not look good when filled with red wine or other dark liquids.

I've got several chalices, including an acrylic one for travel.

The chalice is the symbol of Water.

**Pentacle:** A pentacle is a round flat disk, usually of metal or stone, engraved or painted with a five-pointed star.

If you're good at handicrafts, you may be able to make your own pentacle; if not; the only place to buy one is at an occult specialty dealer. Your pentacle may be as tiny as you wish, or big enough to also use as a cake plate.

The pentacle, although its symbolism encompasses all of the Elements, is used in ritual as a symbol of Earth. In some traditions, a black or dark natural stone may be used instead.

**Broom** (or Besom): A proper, traditional Witch's broom consists of a handle with a phallically carved tip, wrapped in a skirt of twigs or grasses. Thus it symbolizes the union of masculine and feminine energies.

Certain woods are traditionally used to make a broom. The most popular combination is ash handle, birch twigs, and willow bindings. It's impossible, though, to hold a broom together for long with nothing but a few lengths of willow; most of us use rope, wire, staples, or hot-melt glue underneath the willow wrappings.

Or you can simply go to a store that specializes in country crafts and nostalgia, and buy yourself a nice round corn broom.

**Cauldron:** A cauldron should be able to hold fire, water, or whatever else you want it to contain. Ideally, it's made of cast iron -- though brass is a lot easier to care for -- and has three legs, a lid that fits, and a mouth that's narrower than its widest part. It may be of any size you find practical.

Antique shops may have cast-iron cauldrons. So, occasionally, do modern kitchenwares shops. Either way, they're likely to be expensive. Small brass cauldrons,

sold as planters or ornaments, may be much cheaper and easier to find, and are quite adequate for ritual use. Avoid aluminum; it melts and gives off nasty fumes when overheated.

Be patient; it may take you a while to find a cauldron.

**Censer:** Incense burners come in a variety of shapes and sizes. If you prefer, as many Witches do, to use powdered incense on a charcoal disk, be sure your censer is large enough to hold the disk. A handle is a good idea on a brass censer, because you'll want to be able to pick it up and move it when it's hot.

A stoneware soup bowl filled with gravel or kitty litter makes a good and inexpensive incense burner.

**Drum:** A variety of drum styles are suitable for ritual use. The most popular choice is the flat, single-headed Native-style drum; it's compact and relatively lightweight. Some people prefer a dhoubek or other African-style drum on a shoulder strap. Each drum has its own sound and its own favourite style and rhythms; make sure the drum you buy is suited to the way you want to play it.

Rattles may be useful, too. Pick a sturdy, well-balanced rattle that's comfortable in your hand and has a good crisp sound when shaken.

**Bowls:** You may want some or all of the following: A water bowl, a libation bowl, tiny bowls to hold salt or powdered incense, a small metal dish for spent matches.

**Candleholders:** For the quarters, you'll want either coloured tapers or coloured glass votive holders. For the altar and for additional lighting, you'll want a variety of candleholders. If the candle burns all the way down to the base, glass candleholders crack and wooden ones scorch; metal is generally the most practical choice. The best candleholders are broad-based so they won't tip, have a broad lip or basin to catch melted wax, and are easy to clean and care for.

**Consumables:** Charcoal disks can be found in Chinatown, occult supply shops, most smoke shops or Calgary Universal Church Supply. The latter also has a good selection of coloured votives, candle jars, and basic incense. Coloured tapers are 25 cents each or less at Wal-Mart, Zellers, or various discount stores. Ikea has sacks of 30 or 100 votive refills at a good price. Stick and cone incense may be found in Chinatown or at various New Age stores. Herbs and some powdered incense ingredients are at Community Natural Foods, Chinatown, or various local health food stores.