

~ Ask Granny Earth ~

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A cob house.

## ASK GRANNY EARTH

### ALL ABOUT COB HOUSES

I have been obsessed with cob-mania for several years now. When I tell people about my vision of building my own "cob" house, most often they get a puzzled look on their face. I ask them, "Do you know what cob is?" They usually respond, "Corn cobs? You want to build a house using corn cobs?" Then I go on to explain to them what cob is, and how I have a vision of building with cob. And so the purpose of this article is to educate and draw attention to the importance of building in unison with Mother Nature and giving back to her more than what we take.

The word "COB" is an old English word meaning, a lump or a rounded mass of earth. Cob walling, a traditional English technique of monolithic (massive, solid, uniform) earthen wall construction used a mixture of moistened earth and straw. The mud and straw mixture could be laid as walls with or without the use of wooden forms. The earliest documented earthen structures in this country are two cob walled residences in Penfield (Near Rochester), New

York: the Lawrence Johnston House (1832) and the William Gorse House (1836). These structures are still standing today.

If you have ever worked with clay as an art medium, you know first-hand the satisfaction and tranquility that takes place as you create your piece of art from a lump of earth. I have been told that clay contains every mineral element that the human body possesses. This is because it has undergone millenniums of transformation with the natural elements and decaying life matter. These elements are all merged into the malleable clay as a still life form. I think of it as actually being alive, just waiting for my hands to transmute my energy with it into a finished product, be it a pot or a house.

When you begin working with clay, and put your own energy into it, magic happens. If you can still your mind and totally immerse yourself in your project, time seems to fly. Your deepest inner being is expressed in, and becomes part of your clay project. In this sense, working with can be a very healing adventure.

Healing and creative- that's what I think of when I visualize building with cob. First you have to select your building site, arrange for septic and water provisions and excavate (as little as possible) so that you have good drainage away from the house. Next scrape off the topsoil from the proposed house area and dig down to below the frost line, or solid bed rock for your footer. Pile the soil somewhere handy for making cob mixes later. Fill the footer ditch with reinforced poured concrete up to ground level and embed the first layer of stonework into the top of the wet concrete. Next, you'll need to provide for your plumbing and electricity supply lines, put down the cob floor, and decide on what type of roof you'll want.

Now you're ready to start sculpting with cob, which will eventually turn to "stone". You can design your house before you start, or you can create as you go, making any shape you want.

Start with a blend of clay, earth and sand. The proportions used will depend on the type of soil used. A good cob mix only needs about 20-30% of clay. Water is added according to pliability, making the mix not too firm, nor too runny. Then you add a lot of chopped up straw, preferably wheat, which is more fibrous than oat. The best way to mix the ingredients is to use one wheelbarrow full on a tarpaulin and stomp it with your bare feet after water has been added to the sand and clay. Continue with the stomping after adding the straw. The mix is ready as soon as the straw is coated with earth, and the clumps (cob) have a plastic consistency. Start cobbing by carrying hands full or coffee cans full of the mix to the site. Sculpting and being creative is an important part of the construction. So have fun!

There are a lot of details and "tricks of the trade" to learn when cobbing. I recommend the book, [The Cob Builders Handbook](#), by Becky Bee. It gives pictures and detailed instructions, which are very helpful. Ms. Bee has built

her own cob houses, and warns: "Caution: Cob is addicting". She encourages women to build their own cob houses, as a way to be less dependent on the patriarchal system for their shelter. She feels that cobbing is a way for women to re-experience a sense of community, and be empowered to make more life choices for themselves.

This isn't to say that we still don't need men and a few machines to do the really hard work. It's just that building a house with cob is inexpensive, creative, and very possible for an individual, or a group of women to do.

Making homes with natural materials gathered gently from the earth improves the likelihood of the survival of life itself. It is gentle on the planet and reduces the use of wood, steel and toxic building materials. Cob houses are easy, affordable, comfortable and long lasting. They can last for centuries.

Earth is non-toxic and completely recyclable. It is nature's most abundant, cheapest and healthiest building material.

Check out this website - <http://www.naturalbuildingnetwork.org/>