

Tumble Polishing Jewelry

by Barrie Edwards

This method of polishing jewelry involves a burnishing effect caused by the tumbling action of polished steel shot with your jewelry pieces, bringing them to a dazzling sparkle. The major benefits are:

1. No dust & particles flying around the room.
2. No half-polished pieces flying around the room!
3. No burned, blackened fingers.
4. And most importantly, requires none of your valuable time. You can sleep through the whole process if you want!

The only drawback I can figure is that you can't quite get a "mirror" finish on very large, flat surfaces. This would need a little machine buffing after the tumbling, but not nearly what you would normally have to do!

You will need the following equipment:

- **rotary tumbler** traditionally used for rock polishing (I use a Lortone 3A tumbler)
- enough **polished steel shot** to fill the barrel half full
- **soap!** I use Ivory bar soap (grated). You can use a liquid soap, but make sure it is "99 44/100% pure soap" NOT detergent!! Check the label of your soap carefully to make sure it is not a detergent you are using. Also, most jewelry suppliers carry a burnishing compound that would also work. **Note that many people use Dawn Dish Soap in their tumblers as burnishing compound. Formulas are not the same in each country or even in each color! I have read that the blue is the best, however I've always used Ivory bar soap, and given the extra protection that the tallow in the soap gives the silver (it takes AGES for my silver jewelry to tarnish compared to tumbling with anything else!), I'm sticking to it. Your mileage may vary!

It's very important that you make sure the piece you are going to tumble is sanded (using emery paper or boards) as smooth as possible - just as if you were about to take it to the buffing machine. If you take extra care at this point, making sure you've removed any file marks and heavy scratches, you will save lots of time after it's polished. Tumbling with steel shot will NOT remove scratches and imperfections, it will just make them shiny!

Now, put the shot in the tumbler barrel. Fill with enough water to cover the shot by about 3/4 of an inch. Add one tablespoon of soap (I use an old cheese grater to shave the soap). Put your jewelry in the barrel, put the lid on tightly, plug the machine in, and then put the barrel on the machine. Leave it to rotate for 6 to 8 hours (I usually put the tumbler on just before going to bed). Remove the barrel from the tumbler, then remove the pieces from the barrel. Rinse very well with running water. That's it, you're done!! Now you can set your stones, if there are any, and you have a beautifully polished piece of jewelry.

A note about putting the lid on the barrel – do NOT over-tighten the top screw. The inner lid (that's the round flat part that has a rubber gasket over it and a screw sticking up) is made of thin aluminum. When you put the top lid on over the inner lid and start screwing the knob tight, the inner lid starts to flex just a little. Tighten a little and you create a good seal. If you tighten the knob too tight, the flex in the inner lid won't seal properly and the barrel lids will pop open during the tumbling process, setting all your soap, water, shot and jewelry free to make one heck of a mess that you get to clean up. If this happens, it's not the end of the world (which is why we never put our tumblers over top of anything that will be harmed by a water leak!). Gather up all the messy stuff, rinse everything off really well and start over. You can use a magnet to collect the steel shot off the floor and from other nooks and crannies. To make sure you're not over-tightening the lid, screw the knob on finger tight (don't use all the strength you own!), then back it off just a smidge. If you're worried you have it too tight, put the whole tumbler assembly in a large rubbermade container or clean plastic litter box. That will contain the mess until you're confident that you have the lid tightening process down pat!

At some point you may find that your silver looks dull and gray after tumbling for a length of time. This is the barrel breaking in – it doesn't usually happen right away but after a few tumbling sessions. If it should happen, remove your jewelry, rinse the shot well and return the shot to the barrel. Add enough FLAT Coke to cover the shot by about 1/2 an inch. Flat Coke is important so that it doesn't fizz out of control and pop your lid! Tumble with flat Coke for a couple of hours, rinse everything well, then put the shot back in the barrel with soap, tumble for a few hours. At this point, rinse one more time, add fresh soap, throw your sad looking jewelry back in with the shot and tumble for a few hours. It should come out shiny and pretty after all that. If not, repeat the procedure. It can take 2 or 3 runs with Coke to clean the barrel and shot sufficiently.

Helpful Hints

1. Always, (and I mean ALWAYS) leave your shot in the barrel covered with water and soap. Even just a few hours without, can cause rust to set in. Then you'll find that your sparkly jewelry isn't so sparkly any more. The soap (and this is why it is so important that you use a pure soap) will prevent rust from forming on the steel.
2. Tumble polish one chain at a time. It's okay to add other jewelry, like rings and earrings, etc. with the chain, but I have found that more than one chain at a time tends to cause massive knotting and tangling (and sometimes breakage).
3. You will find that you can tumble even the most delicate objects with great success.
4. Only experimentation will show you how many pieces can be tumbled at once. As long as it fits loosely in the barrel, you can tumble it.
5. If your piece was antiqued with liver of sulfur or silver black, gently scrub the piece with a soft toothbrush before tumbling, or give it a baking soda and water rinse. If you don't remove or neutralize the blackening solution, you will find green deposits in hard to reach areas after it is tumbled and dried.
6. There are some stones that can be polished in the setting, but do so at your own risk! I suggest avoiding tumbling any faceted stones, any soft stones, stones with a coating of any kind, any stones you're unsure of and especially any stones that have a great value to you (just in case). Better safe than sorry is the best way to go.
7. And because it bears repeating – DO NOT OVER-TIGHTEN YOUR TUMBLER LID!! See note above! :)
8. It has come to my attention recently that those using older tumbler barrels (used with Dawn or burnishing soap) for years are experiencing the graying of their steel shot and jewelry after using Ivory. Follow the above instructions involving flat Coke to clean the coatings off the shot and jewelry and you should get the great results I've been getting.

Clean your shot after each use, by pouring the mixture into a VERY fine colander or strainer, and rinse well, with running water. Pour the shot back into the barrel, add enough water to cover the shot, add soap, put the lid on, and give it a little shake. It can be stored indefinitely like this.

Good luck, have fun and if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me! **Barrie – fvbeadshow@gmail.com**

Please Note! The above instructions are based on my 20+ years of experience with this type of polishing method and the experiences of the many, many students I've had over the years that have tried and love this method. If this doesn't work for you or you are getting different results, please know that I'd love to discuss the results with you (maybe we can put our heads together and figure out what's happening), however I am in no way responsible for any mishaps or unexpected results.

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