

# Holiday Pomander Lesson

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**Objective:** Students will learn about the medicinal, social, and botanical history of pomanders, a winter holiday tradition that came out of medieval Europe and continues to this day. They will practice small-motor skills while experiencing the therapeutic aromas of citrus and cloves. They will create an ornament to take home or give as a gift.

**Time/location:** This lesson takes about 40 minutes. It can be done outdoors, but is a winter activity so it will likely be done indoors.

## Materials:

- Oranges—one per student, and a handful of extras
- Whole Cloves—about 4 oz per 25 pomanders. (Cloves are sold in the spice section of a grocery store. Look at discount stores or Indian/Asian grocery stores to find them affordably priced.)
- Toothpicks-twice as many toothpicks as students
- Small trays or dishes for the cloves, one tray per 2-3 students
- Ribbons, pre-cut to wrap around the oranges and have a nice bow
- A printout showing photos of pomanders, and a picture or two of old monarchs with their pomanders, fancy jeweled pomanders etc.
- Optional: a pre-made pomander
- Optional: orris root powder in which to roll the completed pomanders, and a paint brush for brushing off the excess. This can help the pomanders dry instead of rotting, and last for years! I have had mixed success with the powder, and it is expensive. Without the powder the pomanders will last from 2-10 weeks before they slowly rot, so I do not generally use it.

## The Lesson:

Start with a **discussion**, but try to get through it in about 10 minutes—

With students assembled in one area, ask them about how plants can be medicine. Students may talk about peppermint or ginger tea for a stomach ache, plantain for a bee sting, echinacea to ward off a cold, aloe vera for burns etc. (If not, bring up these or other examples and discuss.) Explain to students how people did not always have doctors accessible, and that long ago all medicines were derived from plants, animals, and other things that were accessible to people.

Explain the Black Plague. How much detail will depend on the students' ages. As a minimum, explain that long ago there was a terrible illness in Europe that killed a huge percentage of the population. The Legend of The Thieves emerged from this time. Legend has it that, while the plague was killing thousands and people were fleeing their homes and villages, there was a roaming band of thieves that was looting all the goods left behind by victims and their fleeing families. No one understood why they weren't dying, especially since they were handling items left by the sick and the dead. When captured, the thieves shared their secret recipe in exchange for their lives being spared. The thieves revealed their medicine, and it was a blend of oils from citrus fruits and various plants: cloves, cinnamon bark, eucalyptis...the accounts vary. The discovery of "thieves oil" led directly to pomanders.

People would stick cloves into a citrus fruit, often with other plants or spices as well. People would carry these around both to ward off illnesses, and so they wouldn't smell themselves and others. (People could neither bathe often nor get to a dentist. So people were smelly!) Show photos of royals holding pomanders, and decorative pomanders.

In time pomanders came to be used for decoration. But they still emit therapeutic scents and have germ-killing and immune-building power. (Once when I taught this lesson, a kindergartner was not feeling well and refused to

participate. As the students began to pierce their oranges with the cloves, the student felt better and joined the activity. She said she felt better just a few minutes after the room filled with the strong scent of oranges and cloves.)

Next, the **activity**—

Students go to their desks. They can each be given an orange, a toothpick, and a ribbon. Trays of cloves can be distributed for 2-3 students to share. To instruct the activity—

-Ask students to keep their hands still and watch as you hold up your orange.

-The first thing to do is to tie the ribbon *very tightly* around the orange, bottom to top, with a bow on top. (Many/most students will need help with this.)

-(I inform the students that cloves are very expensive and ask them to please be careful of their shared trays of cloves! They can use all they want, but ask them to please try to avoid spills.)

-Next, show students how to prick holes in the orange, 5 at a time. The students can choose their own design, using examples and the photos you showed for inspiration. Something simple like a stripe, a smiley face or a heart is perfect.

-After pricking 5 holes, show how you push the cloves one by one into each hole. Repeat with poking more holes and pushing in more cloves until the design is complete. (Students can start as soon as you have shown them how to do it once.)

Poking more than 5 holes at once is not recommended, because students may then miss some of the holes when they are pressing in the cloves. Holes that aren't closed with cloves will cause the pomander to rot sooner.

If you choose to use orris root powder, have it in a gallon-sized ziplock bag. When the students finish their design, they can shake it to coat in the (tightly sealed) bag, then brush the extra powder off (over the bag, or a paper to catch it) with a wide, soft dry paintbrush.