

GINGERBREAD BUILDER'S GUIDE

Ideas • Sketches • Candy Inspiration • Recipes • Building Tips

Community Gingerbread House Competition & Exhibition

Hosted by the Tamaqua Arts Center

In honor of Linda Yulanavage, celebrating the sweet treats, creativity and holiday spirit that helped make Christmastime in Tamaqua special for so many years.

You do not need to be a professional baker.

This guide is here to help first-time builders, families and experienced creators turn an idea into a sturdy gallery display.

BUILDER TIP Templates, rulers, cookie cutters and online patterns are welcome. Store-bought gingerbread house kits are not part of this competition.

1. Start With an Idea

Your entry can be simple or elaborate. The most important things are that it is homemade, sturdy, creative and large enough to have a presence in the gallery.

- A classic Christmas cottage
- A Victorian mansion
- A row of townhouses
- A gingerbread village
- A train station
- A church or chapel
- A theater
- A downtown storefront
- A bakery or candy shop
- A farmhouse and barn
- A castle
- A ski lodge
- A North Pole workshop
- A Christmas tree farm
- A winter town square
- A fantasy candy house
- A historic building
- A favorite Tamaqua landmark
- Your own home in gingerbread
- An entirely imaginary building

BUILDER TIP Local inspiration is encouraged. Tamaqua's station, churches, Victorian homes, storefronts and historic buildings can all translate beautifully into gingerbread.

2. Five Easy Design Directions

The sketches on the following pages are idea starters, not required plans. They are there to give you ideas of the shapes necessary to construct your design. Change the proportions, add details, combine buildings or make the design your own.

Idea Sketch 1: Beginner Cottage



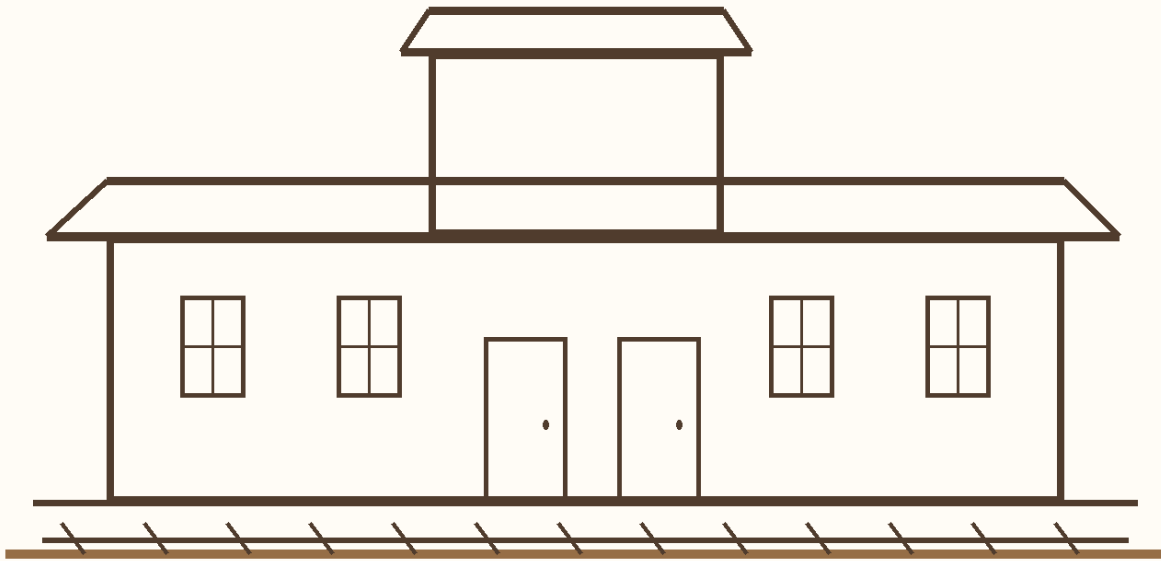
BEGINNER COTTAGE — Build the basic shell first, then add a chimney, porch, landscaping or candy trim.

Idea Sketch 2: Victorian House



VICTORIAN HOUSE — A basic house becomes much more dramatic when you add a tower, porch or second gable.

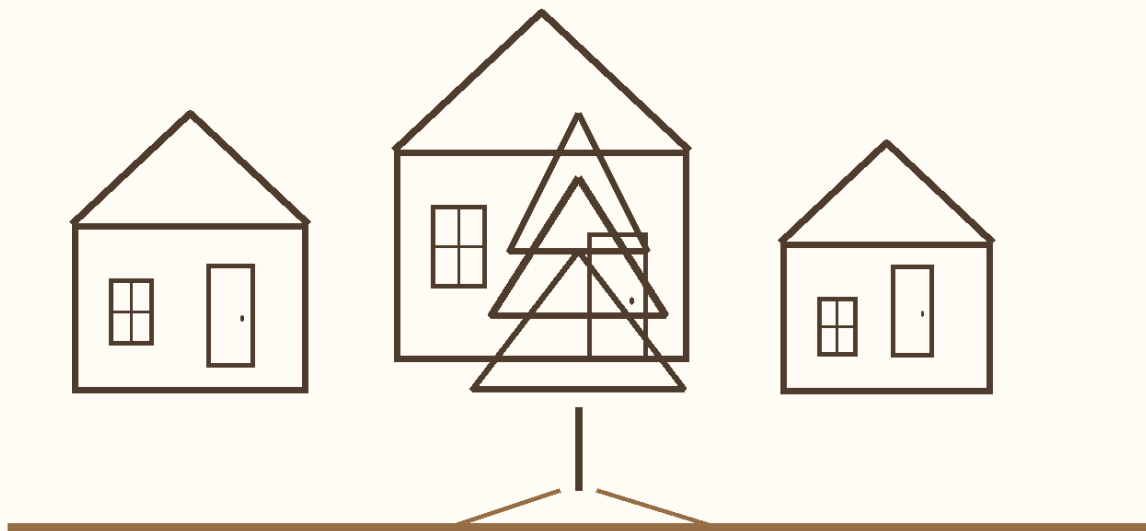
Idea Sketch 3: Train Station / Long Building



Great for beginners: most pieces are rectangles. Details create the wow factor.

TRAIN STATION — Long buildings are friendly to beginners because most walls are simple rectangles.

Idea Sketch 4: Gingerbread Village



Perfect for families or groups: each person can build one small structure.

GINGERBREAD VILLAGE — A great family or group project; divide the buildings among several people.

Idea Sketch 5: Church or Chapel



A rectangle + tower instantly reads as a church. Try candy stained-glass windows.

CHURCH OR CHAPEL — A rectangular building plus a tower creates an instantly recognizable silhouette.

3. The Gingerbread Candy Toolbox

You do not need specialty cake-decorating supplies. A trip through the candy and snack aisles can provide most of what you need.

Use it for...	Try...
Roofs & shingles	cereal squares, mini shredded wheat, wafer cookies, chocolate squares, peppermints, gum pieces, fondant tiles
Brick & stone	red licorice pieces, cereal, crushed cookies, chocolate pieces, candy rocks, piped royal icing
Windows	crushed clear hard candy, Life Savers-style candy, yellow or amber candy, royal icing frames
Doors & shutters	chocolate bars, wafer cookies, rectangular cookies, fondant, pretzel sticks
Columns & railings	candy canes, pretzel rods, wafer rolls, licorice, piped royal icing
Trees & bushes	ice cream cones with green icing, gumdrops, stacked candy, piped frosting
Snow	royal icing, sanding sugar, powdered sugar, shredded coconut
Fences	pretzel sticks, candy canes, wafer cookies, royal icing
Walkways	crushed cookies, cereal, chocolate rocks, pretzels, brown sugar, flat candy
Chimneys	stacked gingerbread, wafer cookies, rectangular candy, piped brick icing

BUILDER TIP For a long gallery display, drier decorations such as hard candy, cookies, pretzels and royal icing are safer choices than soft or moist foods.

4. Possible Recipes for a Strong Display House

These recipes are intended for a display structure. Construction gingerbread is deliberately harder and less tender than a cookie you would normally serve to eat.

Simple Structural Gingerbread

Ingredients

- 1 cup vegetable shortening
- 1 cup packed dark brown sugar
- 1 1/4 cups molasses
- 1/2 cup water
- 7 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 Tbsp ground ginger
- 2 tsp cinnamon
- 1 tsp ground cloves
- 1 tsp salt
- No baking soda or baking powder

Method

1. Cream shortening and brown sugar until combined. Mix in molasses, then water.
2. Combine flour, spices and salt separately. Gradually mix into the wet ingredients. The dough should be very firm.
3. Wrap and refrigerate at least 1 hour.
4. Roll directly on parchment about 1/4 inch thick. For very large walls, slightly thicker pieces can add strength.
5. Place templates on the dough, cut the pieces and remove scraps before baking.
6. Bake around 325°F for 20–30 minutes, depending on size and thickness, until firm and dry.
7. While still warm, place the template back over the piece and trim edges straight if needed.
8. Cool completely flat. For best results, let pieces dry uncovered 24–48 hours before building.

BUILDER TIP Bake one day and build the next. Dry panels are easier to handle and less likely to sag.

Royal Icing “Gingerbread Cement”

- 4 cups confectioners’ sugar
- 3 tablespoons meringue powder
- About 5–6 tablespoons warm water

Beat for 5–7 minutes until extremely stiff. The icing should hold a peak and should not slowly melt back into itself. Add water only a few drops at a time if it is too thick.

BUILDER TIP Pipe a generous bead along each joint and brace the walls with cans, boxes or jars until the icing hardens. Build the walls first; add the roof only after the shell is stable.

5. Candy Stained-Glass Windows

Stained-glass windows are an easy way to make a church, station, Victorian house or storefront look special.

- Cut the window opening in the gingerbread wall before baking.
- Crush translucent hard candy into small pieces.
- Place the wall flat on parchment and fill the opening with the candy pieces.
- Bake the panel normally. The candy will melt into a translucent window.
- Let the panel cool completely before lifting it from the parchment.
- Try yellow or amber for warm glowing windows; red and green for Christmas; or several colors for a church-window effect.

6. Building Tricks That Make It Easier

Make templates first. Draw walls and roofs on cardstock or cardboard before rolling your dough.

Roll on parchment. Cut the pieces where they will bake so you do not have to lift and distort soft dough.

Bake similar sizes together. Small pieces finish much faster than giant walls.

Trim while warm. Straighten edges immediately after baking while the gingerbread is still slightly soft.

Let everything dry. A day of drying before construction can make a major difference.

Build in stages. Walls first, roof next, decorating last.

Brace the structure. Use boxes or cans while icing dries.

Use hidden supports if needed. Cardboard, foam board, dowels, wire or other supports may be hidden inside the structure under the contest rules.

Keep it display-friendly. Avoid fresh fruit, whipped cream, cream cheese frosting, custard, dairy fillings and other ingredients that need refrigeration.

Start simple. A strong basic building covered in thoughtful candy details can look just as impressive as a complicated structure.

7. Before You Bring It to the Gallery

- ☐ Original, homemade construction — not a commercial gingerbread house kit
- ☐ Mounted securely to a rigid display board
- ☐ Approximately 16" × 16" to 24" × 24" base
- ☐ Large enough to have a strong gallery presence
- ☐ Completely assembled, dry and stable
- ☐ No refrigerated or highly perishable ingredients
- ☐ Hidden supports are secure and not distracting from the finished design
- ☐ Your name and entry information are ready to accompany the piece

Most Important: Have Fun With It

Think big • Build together • Make something you would be excited to see in the gallery

Contest dates: Drop-off begins November 22, 2026 • Exhibition and People's Choice voting begin November 28, 2026
Tamaqua Arts Center • 125 Pine Street • Tamaqua, Pennsylvania