

Playing With Fire: Choosing a Butane Mini Torch

by Ronna Sarvas Weltman

I must confess to a certain fascination with fire, which made my reluctance to venture into using a torch all the more frustrating. When I used a mini torch to draw beads (the process of forming a little ball at the end of a piece of fine silver wire to make a head pin), it turned out to be not only easy, but fun.

I spoke to jewelry artist and metal arts teacher **Kristi Zevenbergen**, who explained that mini (or micro) torches can be ideal for many jewelry projects, including drawing beads, fusing high-karat gold and fine silver, and torch-firing some enamels and precious metal clays. Although mini torches can be used for some smaller-project soldering, care needs to be taken to purchase the appropriate heatproof materials to use with them.

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Mini torches fueled with butane fuel mixed with air produce a pinpoint flame of 2300°F–2500°F. All mini torches have automatic ignition systems, and some include child-safety features. Although all mini torches are designed to work the same way, their quality varies. It's important to choose one that provides safe and reliable fuel delivery and durable automatic ignition. Generally speaking, inexpensive torches found at hardware stores can be unreliable, but that doesn't mean the most expensive model is necessarily the best. Two dependable choices are the Roburn Microtorch (\$26–\$45) and the Blazer Micro Torch (\$40–\$80). Even the best mini torches, however, occasionally have faulty ignitions. It's therefore wise to buy from a merchant with a friendly return policy.



IT'S A GAS!


Low-quality fuels will cause spitting and clogging, so spend a little extra on triple-refined fuel. King and Blazer brands are reliable and readily available on the Internet. Since shipping costs for fuels include a hazardous material surcharge, it's a good rule of thumb to order larger—and less frequent—shipments.

BETTER SAFE THAN . . .

Remember you're working with open flame. Work in a well-ventilated area and keep the fuel canister away from heat. Working surfaces and surrounding materials need to be fireproof. Ceramic tile, cement backer board, and metal are all good choices. Simply tying back long hair or avoiding billowing sleeves isn't enough—you'd be surprised how often bangs or close-fitting garments come dangerously close to the flame. Therefore always pay close attention to

the flame, being mindful of hair, clothing, and flammables in the surrounding work areas.

IT'S ALL ABOUT EMPOWERMENT

While cautioning that mini torches have limitations and mastering working with flame takes instruction and practice, Zevenbergen delights in mini torches' use. "This torch is powerful," she explains. "It allows women to make things that they never thought possible. You get this little puppy in your hands and you can do all kinds of things—even make crème brûlée. There are so many possibilities." 

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