



Lecture 01 - What is required to get started

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Well I think everyone who is going to bother, or who is already familiar enough, has had plenty of time to sift through the prima (herbal work) papers in the file area. (For anyone who joined the list after the notice, reference to the relevant doc's can be found in the file upload notices in the message list, or in the file area itself.)

What I intend doing now is to start a series of emails that will go blow-by-blow through the various aspects of the prima. I will stop briefly between each post and wait for any comments or questions that require replies before posting the next email in the series (note: the main series of posts will be numbered for easier reference.)

The first point I would like to make here is that no question is too stupid to ask. A good portion of the subscribers here are novices and so if a question arises in your mind, chances are at least one other person is wondering the same thing.

So let us start right at the beginning.

What is required to get started?

Whenever I am asked about what is necessary to an effective practice of alchemy, by someone who has little or no idea about alchemical lab work, I usually start by assuring them that the necessary investment is not much more than that required by a novice occultist who his hungerly buying good literature on the subject. Any suggestions that the expense of novice lab work is great should be totally ignored.

All of the equipment required can be brought cheaply from kitchenware shops, the supermarket, hardware store or second hand store, except, that is, for one piece of essential lab glassware.

This piece of glassware, a retort or distillation train, can be difficult to obtain in some places. Without this piece of equipment the entire process can not go forward, so my suggestion is to first put the feelers out to see if one is going to be easy or difficult to obtain, before dealing with any other lab necessities.

The easiest way to find lab glassware is to join a lot of alchemy elists and ask for recommendations as to suppliers. I have seen, regularly, glassware suppliers or glassware makers on alchemy lists

advertising their wares. After that ebay can be a good place to start. One of the guys on this list has brought and sold a lot of glassware on ebay cheaply and safely. After that the next best approach is to look for suppliers online. I know a number of people who have successfully brought chemicals and glass over the net. The last method I have had success with is simply look over the yellow pages. I have always used one supplier and I found in this way, and have been happily buying glassware from him for 15 years.

So what do you buy? The choice is a personal one to start with. You want either a distillation train (which is composed of 2,3 or 4 pieces of glassware) or a retort. A distillation train is often more expensive than a retort, but it is easier to buy (usually) and more efficient to use. Because it is composed of several pieces of glassware if you break one piece it is relatively cheaper to replace that piece than to replace an entire retort, which is one single piece of glass.

Once you decide what you prefer you should be aware that lab glassware is supplied from two different types of source (generally). The most common source of lab glass is a scientific (glassware/chemical/equipment) supplier. More often than not you will "not" get a retort from this source, as it is an older type of equipment rarely used these days. The second source of glass is a glass blower ... technically called a lampworker. Such a person makes different lab glass equipment by buying various shapes of glass (bowls, balloons, tubing, etc) and welds them together with a gas torch to create either standard equipment or individually requested novel designs.

Lampworkers often work alone at home, or from a small shop. Sometimes Universities have their own lampworkers which sell to the public. In my opinion befriending a lampworker is by far the best way to get glassware reliably and safely. Big commercial glassware suppliers can often be unreliable and a major pain in the neck to deal with. They also have the prime problem of only being able to supply industry standard glassware, which can sometimes be inconvenient to alchemists.

My only important recommendation about the distillation train or retort, for a beginner, is that you don't buy one with a boiling flask (or balloon) smaller than 1 litre. 2 litres is a lot more helpful, but the cost difference between 1 and 2 litres can be great. The kind of condenser one might order for a distillation train is not really important, but lieberg condensers are by far the easiest to clean.

So you have your main piece of glass sorted, the next thing should be storage space, then work space. If you are going to work from your kitchen bench, and on your kitchen stove (which is not uncommon for beginners) then you need somewhere safe to store all your gear. Cupboards used for this purpose should be lockable. I found that a couple of trucks was the ideal choice. They could be locked and I could move them around easily and keep them out of sight.

Wherever you decide to work there are a number of absolutely necessary issues that need to be addressed.

- (1) You need running cold water and drainage (a sink is a good idea too.)
- (2) Bench space of at least 1.5 metres (4-5 feet).
- (3) Low sunlight.
- (4) Privacy.

Privacy is very important. There are few places, or situations, today where home lab's are welcomed without concern. If someone walks in on you running a distillation train you are going to find yourself in a dangerous situation. Home lab's = illegal drug manufacture in the public imagination ... and alchemy raises questions of dark occultism or questionable sanity.

It is my advice, then, right from the get-go that you make your mind up that you never intend telling anyone local (friends, etc), about what you are up to, and that you intend working in secrecy. Then start seriously considering how this can be most effectively achieved. When I first started this meant I could only safely work late at night till the early hours, and then often only on weekends in this manner. This was because that time was the least likely that friends or strangers would come calling at my door when I had lab gear all over the kitchen table and benches and weird equipment set up over the stove emitting strange smells.

Having satisfied yourself that you have somewhere to work, and that you can work in safety and in privacy, then you can go about collecting the rest of the necessary equipment.

- (1) A mortar and pestal (any average kitchenware shop has them. Don't buy wood or marble if you can avoid it).
- (2) Pyrex dishes (for heating and evaporating substances.) Small bowl shaped ones and flat pie dish types are helpful. Ceramic (glazed) dishes serve just as well here.
- (3) A funnel and filters. Plastic funnels are fine and coffee filters are quite ok.
- (4) Glass jars with lids that seal air tight. Anything 1 litre and over, and some small 250-500ml ones.
- (5) An outdoor heat source (like a BBQ or portable gas stove) and a private place to use it.

Once all if these things are covered you need to consider whether you are going to brew the alcohol you will need, or whether you are going to go the easy (and less learned) path of simply distilling alcohol from beverage spirits. If you're going to brew it yourself you need to study up on wine making and get a wine kit together. If the distil-beverage option is yours then you need to buy enough spirits to allow you to obtain about 2 litres of pure alcohol. Brandy is best, wine is good but expensive (usually), and the likes of vodkha come in at the end of the line.

The last consideration you must make is the herb you are going to use for your first experiment. Fresh herb is best (of course), but dried can work if its not past its use-by date. For learning purposes grass off your lawn is just as good as expensive or rare medicinal herb. But if you want something in the middle ground somewhere I suggest sourcing a healthy natural supply of a medicinal plant (such as lavender, mint, lemon balm, dandelion, sage, etc, etc), or grow your

own (the best choice by far.) Fruits are quite usable and easy to get relatively cheaply. You will require at least 1 kilo dry weight.

Once all of these considerations are filled, you are ready to start the first manual operation.

~rubaphilos