

Rock Tumbling for Beginners – Part 1 of 2

Types of Rock Tumblers

There are two different types of rock tumblers - rotary and vibratory. Rotary tumblers are much more common and best for beginners. When most people picture a rock tumbler, they're thinking of a rotary. This is the type of tumbler that will knock off the edges, shape, and smooth out rough rocks during the coarse grind stage. Rocks tumbled in a rotary tumbler will change shape and become rounded.

Vibratory tumblers are less common with beginners and are typically used for fine polishing rocks you've already shaped. A vibratory tumbler will not shape your rocks like a rotary tumbler. If you just want to polish your rocks and maintain the same shape and angles, then a vibratory tumbler may be for you. The main advantage to a vibratory tumbler is that it dramatically speeds up the tumbling process for stages AFTER your rocks have been shaped (i.e., medium grind, fine grind, and polish). So while each of the four stages in a rotary tumbler can take a week on average, stages 2-4 can all be done in only one week.

An ideal setup would be to buy both a rotary and vibratory tumbler. This way you can do your coarse grind and shaping during the first week in your rotary, then switch over to your vibratory the next week to handle the other stages. If you're buying a rock tumbler for the first time, go with a rotary.

Best Rotary Tumblers

Rotary tumblers range in size and price depending on how many rocks you want to tumble at the same time. Sizing is expressed in pounds. A three pound tumbler will hold about two pounds of rock (and one pound of water and grit).

You can also get a double barrel rotary tumbler. These are great if you're tumbling two different kinds of rocks at the same time especially if they're a different hardness. Remember, always tumble rocks together of similar hardness. This is especially true in the polish stages. If you really wanted, you could tumble rocks together of different hardness in stage one and two. But be sure to separate them before stage three and four!

Another good reason to have a double barrel tumbler is if you have two batches of rocks in different stages. So for example, if you start the coarse grind process on one batch, then a week later you want to start another batch. You can use one barrel for the new batch's coarse grind, and use the second barrel for first batch's medium grind. It's like having two tumblers for the price of one!

If you're just looking to tumble larger amount of rocks as one batch, don't buy a double barrel. It's much easier to manage a single barrel that's double the size (only one barrel to clean and maintain).

The two brands you want to look for when buying a rotary rock tumbler are Lortone and Thumler's. The most popular Lortone tumbler for beginners is the 3A Single Barrel rotary. The most popular beginner rotary tumbler from Thumler is the Model T 3lb single barrel. Thumler's also makes a very popular mid-sized tumbler called the Model B. You can read our review here (<https://www.smarterhobby.com/rock-tumbling/thumlers-tumbler-model-b-review/>). Both of these tumblers have 3 lb barrels. You can't go wrong with either.

Supplies

Once you've picked out your tumbler, you'll need a few more supplies such as:

Grit

When you're first starting out, stick to the simple four step process (coarse, medium/fine, pre-polish, and polish).

The four stages of grit you'll want to use are:

- 60/90 silicon carbide for initial grinding and shaping of rocks.
- 120/220 silicon carbide for smoothing surface after initial shaping.
- Pre-polish aluminum oxide for preparing rocks for the final polish.
- Polish aluminum oxide for the final polish.

The exact type of grit may differ depending on which tumbler you're using so always refer to the instruction manual that comes with your machine. You can buy all four levels of grit as a kit from your local rock shop or on [Amazon](#).

Plastic Pellets

You'll want to have these on hand for small tumble loads when you don't have enough rocks to fill the entire barrel. These are great for taking up the empty space in the tumbler and help to deliver more of the polish to your rocks. Pellets also help to 'cushion' the impact of rocks in your tumbler, and can even speed up the process since they encourage more tumbling and less sliding in the barrel. One batch of these is all you need to last quite a while as they can be reused. Also, pellets should only be used in rotary tumblers - never in vibratory.

As an alternative to plastic pellets, some folks like to use other material like corn or walnut shells. If you end up becoming a serious rockhound, you may eventually look into things like slab saws, trim saws, arbors, and oscillating laps. But we'll save those tools for another time since this guide is for the beginner!

Excerpt from *Ultimate Beginners Guide to Rock Tumbling* by Mark Orwig

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