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Hints for Baking Christmas Cookies

Here are a few hints to help make baking Christmas cookies an easy and pleasurable experience:

1. Choose your recipes well in advance. Make a list, then eliminate a third of the recipes. Paging through cookbooks looking for recipes makes us all overly ambitious.
2. Make a photocopy of each recipe – then you won't have to bring books into the kitchen, especially if your counter space is cramped.
3. Make a physical inventory of your ingredients. I can't tell you how many times I've opened a cupboard and seen that the ginger or baking powder are sitting on the shelf, only to discover later on when I was ready to use them, that the container or jar only had a little left in the bottom. Open jars, bags, and other containers to make sure how much is there. Sniff spices to make sure they haven't become too old to impart the flavor you need.
4. Inventory equipment, too. Make sure you have the correct sizes of pans, especially for bar cookies which would bake up too thick or too thin if you change the pan size. Check that you have cutters and any other specialty equipment required. Take a look at the parchment paper or non-stick foil to make sure you have enough. And don't forget the containers you'll need for storing the baked cookies.
5. Over-estimate your use of staples such as flour, sugar, butter, and eggs. You might taste a new recipe and decide you need another batch or two.
6. Clean the refrigerator and freezer – make sure you'll have room to chill doughs and freeze baked cookies.
7. Get a buddy: Enlist the help of a friend so you can bake together and be twice as productive. Decide on how you'll split the baked cookies beforehand, though.
8. If you are preparing any recipes that require room temperature ingredients, take them out late the night before so they'll be at the right temperature for mixing.
9. Get an early start: Have a good breakfast and start baking early in the day. I like to start in the pre-dawn hours to make sure I won't be distracted by the phone during the first few critical hours.
10. Measure out all the ingredients before starting a recipe, then go back and check that they're all there. Nothing is worse than putting a pan of cookies into the oven and realizing that you never put in the baking powder or you missed one of spices.
11. When pans need to be buttered, use soft, not melted, butter – it coats more thickly assuring a good release. Just put a stick of butter into a small pan or bowl with a brush and place it near the stove.
12. Wear comfortable shoes that give you good support, especially if you're not accustomed to spending an entire day on your feet.
13. Plan on a nourishing and easy lunch before you start baking – this can be as easy as making a sandwich and wrapping it up. You'll be happy you did when you get hungry and don't need to stop to decide what to eat, or worse, start picking on the nuts and chocolate and wind up with an upset stomach and still have hours of baking ahead of you.
14. Unless you have a really large kitchen, plan on a place for cooling baked cookies. Cover your dining table with a heatproof pad and set out some racks. I use a couple of cheap folding tables that are stored in a closet most of the time. For heavy baking days,

I use one to hold ingredients waiting to be used and another to hold the cooling racks and finished cookies.

15. Use a ruler: If you need to cut bar cookies into 2-inch squares, measure the correct distance so they'll look neat and all be the same size.

16. Above all, enjoy the process – holiday baking should provide you with as much pleasure as the results will to their recipients.

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