

Make Edible Amber Fossils

A favorite topic of study in elementary science classes is that of prehistoric life - dinosaurs, fossils, and creatures that have long since been extinct. Second grade students are primed for such a unit of study. Their natural curiosity now extends beyond the world they can immediately see around them to a world that existed many, many years ago. With a better understanding of time and basic science concepts, they're ready to learn about how our world works, and what our world was like before they were in it!

Fossils are clues that scientists use to gather knowledge about prehistoric life. One type of fossil comes from hardened tree sap. When creatures became trapped in the sap, they were well-preserved. Today, these fossils, called "amber," provide scientists with an amazing look at creatures from long ago.

Here's an activity to help preserve your second grader's excitement about science.

What You Need:

- 1 package lemon-flavored gelatin
- Red food coloring
- 1 ¼ cups of boiling water
- Empty egg carton
- Cooking spray
- Plastic eggs (bottom halves only; be sure there are no holes in them!)
- Small gummy candies in various shapes: insects, fish, spiders, worms, etc.

What You Do:

1. Separate the plastic eggs. Wash and dry, and have your child place the bottom half of each egg in the egg carton. Let your child spray each with a light layer of cooking spray.
2. Mix the gelatin with the boiling water. Stir until completely dissolved. Add a drop of red food coloring, and stir.
3. Carefully pour the gelatin in the eggs so they are about 3/4 full. Place the carton in the refrigerator.
4. When the surface is almost set, have your child gently press a gummy candy into each of the eggs. Make sure she pushes the candy in only part-way, so that it looks suspended in the gelatin, rather than sunken down at the bottom. Because the gelatin is not completely set at this point, the hole from where the gummy was pushed in should close up and disappear.
5. Refrigerate the fossils for several more hours until completely firm.
6. Once firm, invert each egg onto a plate. Ask your child what she sees in the "amber."
7. Now tell her it's time to make like a fossil hunter, and DIG IN!

When you and your child have finished making your fossils, discuss with her how this edible model is similar to real amber fossils. The amber takes on the shape of its mold, just as the gelatin took on the shape of the egg molds. The creature caught in the tree resin becomes suspended in the center of the amber as it fossilizes, and the creature remains preserved and relatively unchanged just as the gummy did. The amber is mostly transparent (like the gelatin) making it easy to see the piece of preserved, prehistoric life. As it hardens, amber becomes so strong that it can preserve the creatures suspended inside for thousands of years! Amazing!

