



## Middle of the Mandrel

### The pros and cons of making beads in the middle of the mandrel

By Diane Woodall

Most beadmakers today make their beads on the end of the mandrel, however some of us prefer to work in the middle. There are advantages and disadvantages to both techniques, but I believe that working in the middle, especially from the beginning, helps you to achieve balanced, well formed beads earlier on, and in the long-run will enable you to form your beads more quickly and with less strain on your back and shoulders.

The most common argument I get against working in the middle is that it is too difficult and time consuming to dip the mandrels. There is actually a simple way to dip in the middle and here is how it's done: Using a small container (pizza dipping sauce containers work great), mound the bead release slightly. The surface tension of the bead release will keep it mounded, but put a paper towel under the container to catch drips. Simply lay the mandrel in the bead release, remove it slowly and then tap the mandrel gently on your table before placing it in your sand-filled container to dry. When you are finished dipping your mandrels pour the remaining bead release back into the container, wipe out the little cup with the paper towel you laid out and you are done. There is no question that it takes a little more effort to dip in the middle, but it's pretty easy once you try it.

There are some kilns that simply won't allow mandrels to be stacked in if the beads are in the middle, so if you have one of these kilns, you will have to work on the end. I have a fire brick kiln from Sundance that has a front flap and a perforated metal rack in the back where I can place my beads as they are made. As they cool I simply move them over and keep stacking. A mandrel with a bead in the middle fits nicely into a kiln like this.

When you work in the middle of the mandrel you are able to hold the mandrel with both hands. When you marver a bead on your torch marver you can press with one hand and guide with the other. I use a torch marver or a Val Cox tabletop marver for all of my shaping and am able to roll and press using both hands. I can shape my beads much more quickly than if I had the use of just one hand. Most beadmakers who make their beads on the end of the mandrel use a hand-held marver in one hand while holding the bead in the other. I agree that having the marver at eye level is beneficial and makes it easy to see your work. You can still do this if you work in the middle, but it's a little awkward. Again, you have to decide what works best for you.

Another advantage to working in the middle is that when you are applying a design to a bead you can flip the mandrel so that you are always working from the "easy" side. For right-handed people it's the right. When applying dots I apply the dots to the right side, flip the bead and apply the rest of the dots from the same side. It is much less awkward and also produces more uniform results, especially when you are first learning and are trying to master consistency.

One of the biggest benefits is that, by using both hands to hold the mandrel, you eliminate some of the stress to your shoulders and back. You can rotate your bead and easily keep it level because you are using both hands to hold the mandrel. I use a Creation Station and rest my elbows on the pads as I rotate my bead. Better yet, you can spin the mandrel with very little effort.

The one big disadvantage is that there simply isn't enough room on the ends of the mandrel for you to grip with your entire hand. You must hold the mandrel by your fingertips rather than in your fist. This is difficult for some people who have been making beads a long time, but fairly easy for beginners because they have not yet attained the "muscle memory" from years of experience.

Of course, you can always use a tool to hold the end of your mandrel if you still want to work on the end, but that is just one more tool you have to pick up and put down when your hands are right there on the ends of your arms. For those of you who work on the end of the mandrel, changing now may be awkward for you at first, but I suggest that you all give it a try and see which method you prefer. You may find that a simple change like this is exactly what you needed to get you past your hurdles.

Torch on!