

Thoughts on Portable Maypole Construction

by Mike Ruff – Maypole expert and author of The Maypole Manual

I have worked with many different maypoles and seen many more and the key factors are definitely the structural stability of the pole and the functionality of the crown. The first is key for any safety concerns, which are rightfully an essential priority in these days. Many of the old maypoles used to be quite wobbly and often relied on people to support them which is generally no longer acceptable.

These ideas are a guide not a design template.

A maypole consists of a Pole, a Base, Ribbons and a Crown, which attaches the ribbons to the Pole. I will deal with each section separately.

The Pole

My experience is that poles of around 3 – 3.5 m or 10 – 12 ft in height work well for many situations. Larger poles look great but take up a lot more space and all the dances take longer.

The pole I use most regularly has two steel sections, both around 1.50m in length that slot together with a 40 mm overlap where one section slots inside the other with a small lug and notch arrangement to prevent rotation. The steel is 50 mm in diameter and similar to scaffolding poles.

It is possible to use wood for the pole but this can be harder to make sure the joints have suitable strength or, if using a single length, makes it harder to transport. It is also important to ensure that the wood is suitably treated to ensure it does not rot or suffer from woodworm.

Plastic tubing can also be used successfully and is much lighter, as long as it has sufficient strength to withstand the strains imposed by ribbons being pulled together and often asymmetrically.

The Base

I have a definite preference for a square base as opposed to a round one. A circular one of the same radius of the diagonals will take up considerably more space for transportation. The key is securing the pole into the base and with steel this will usually involve welding.

I am used to a base that is just under 1 m square, constructed of angle iron with diagonal struts of tubular steel similar to that used for the pole and a vertical sleeve to accept the lower end of the pole. The latest design also has a wooden section underneath the iron for added stability. This is often enough for indoor teaching and training sessions. Outdoors with the wind to consider and with members of the public joining in, I will usually add extra weight to the base by using stage weights or sandbags.

An alternative approach is to take plate steel and weld the sleeve to that base.

Wooden poles can make use of tapered brackets going up the side of the pole.

It is also possible to “hide” the construction of the base in a wooden box, which can be more decorative but adds extra work to setting up and taking down. At the same time this can be used to provide extra stability where the pole goes through the top of the box.

Finally, for semi-permanent Maypoles that will be staying in one place, it is possible to sink the Maypole into the ground but you may need to dig down a decent distance, probably at least a metre. The pole can then be firmly fixed or, as I have seen in various places, the pole can be slotted into some sort of sleeve that stays permanently in the ground and can be covered up when the Maypole is being stored during the winter.

The Ribbons

Generally, these are made of a hard-wearing braid which can last for years and keep their colour. If the Maypole is not being used that frequently then ordinary silk ribbon of anything wider than 25 mm will work.

The length needs to be around 1.5 times the working height of the maypole (i.e. where the ribbons attach) and I find it useful to have loops for the dancers to hold on to the ribbons.

I like to have 24 ribbons in 4 colours around the pole as this gives many different options for teaching including reducing those numbers to 12 if fewer dancers or more space is required (more details in the Maypole Manual).

Attaching the ribbons to the crown will depend on whether there are hooks or holes on the crown, but I would suggest that some sort of ring or carabiner fastening is sewn into a small loop at the upper end of the ribbon.

The Crown

There are many different options for the crown varying in complexity with options for rotating and fixed sections which can have decorative features and the option to add decorations on the day.

Practically, a simple disc is sufficient with either hooks around the edge or holes drilled around it. It does not need to rotate and there are very few dances that use this feature.

Please note that anything here is merely advice and suggestions and it is the responsibility of anyone constructing a Maypole to make sure that their particular maypole is safe and that, as someone with no engineering or design qualifications, I accept no responsibility for faults in design or construction.

Supply of Maypoles

Many people constructing their own Maypole have purchased ready-made ribbons.

Obviously, I can arrange for the supply of an Educational Aids Maypole but with the increased cost of steel and transportation the costs can be prohibitive, particularly outside the UK.

It is also possible to buy a crown separately.

If you have any questions then please contact me.