

How to Make a Birchbark Container

Birchbark has many different uses because it is lightweight, flexible when damp, waterproof and insect resistant. It was used by Native Americans for constructing almost everything they used; canoes, wigwams, bowls, spoons, trays, baskets and pouches. Birchbark continues to be used today by modern indigenous artists.

The bark was often decorated using porcupine quills, painted designs or with designs scraped into the soft underbark. The Wabanaki were skilled in collecting small quantities of the bark without injuring the tree. For those who wish to try the activity below, the birchbark should be gathered from a tree that has already been cut (or blown down) rather than from a living tree. If you cannot find birchbark, try this pattern with a paper shopping bag, or any thick paper instead.

Material and Equipment:

- Birchbark (or thick paper)
- Awl or large needle
- Waxed linen or nylon thread
- Scissors

Instructions:

- 1) Gather a section of birchbark from a fallen tree (*Do NOT remove birchbark from a live tree*).
- 2) Prepare birchbark by soaking in warm water which will help make it more flexible (skip this step if using paper).
- 3) Cut birchbark (or paper) with scissors into a container shape as seen in the side diagram. Make holes with an awl or large needle around the periphery (edges) about 1/4-inch from the edge. Much like birchbark canoe construction, the *white* side of the birchbark will be the inside of the container.
- 4) Get your thread and start sewing the sides together (as seen in diagram) with a whip-stitch (go down the holes, in and out of the basket, in a circular motion).
- 5) The top edge of the container may be reinforced perhaps with a spruce root, vine or small branch. Once in place, over sew into position (same whip-stitch as above).

Some care must be taken during sewing as birchbark can split.

Once completed the container may be decorated by etching a design on the outer surface of the bark by scraping off parts of the dark inner layer (or you can draw patterns directly on the surface)!

