

## Craft Module #1: Coal-burned Bowls

*“A culture is no better than its wood”.*

*W.H. Auden*

Well, that was a mighty wind from the north we had the other day. We had a 60 ft. tall cedar tree fall in the yard and rather than moan about what we lost I have been thinking about what to make from all that wonderful wood. So far, the list runs to spoons, bowls, water barrels, tables, decorative trim, friction fire kits for summer camp, on and on.



In this module, we will look at an ancient craft: coal-burned bowls. Before the advent of metal edged tools, carving out bowls was a laborious process. Stone edged tools were definitely used but were either blunt to prevent breaking or sharp but broke easily. Hence the use of fire as a tool for clearing out wood before the final finishing process.

**Step 1:** Obtain a round of wood; cedar is good and easy to work with. Birch is denser and will require more work, but it will last longer.

8 inch tall round, for a small bowl, 12-14 inch tall round for a big bowl, approx. 12 inch diameter.

**Step 2:** Split the round in half, now you can make two bowls if you want.

**Step 3:** Start a fire; I use natural mesquite charcoal if doing this with a class. You want nice large, long burning coals. You can use chunks of wood rather than charcoal, just don't split them too small.

**Step 4:** Gouge out a quarter size piece of wood from the center, either with a gouge or carefully with a knife. Stick the point in and slowly rotate the piece of wood until you have a small depression.

**Step 5:** A pair of tongs is useful here. Grab a coal and put in the middle of bowl and start to blow on it. A narrow blow pipe for blowing on the coal is nice to have (think straw diameter). The coals can throw sparks so eye protection for kids is a good choice.





**Step 6:** You can add more than one coal at a time, get the fire burning well in your bowl . Move the coals around to make sure the bowl gets burned evenly everywhere. If the kids energy starts to lag, the whole process can take a couple hours, it is pretty fun to give them marshmallows and let them make s'mores over their burning bowls.

**Step 7:** If the bowl starts burning too close to any edge, just pour a little water on that edge. Make sure you don't burn too deeply in the bowl either. The bowl will burn deeper than it looks so go slowly and carefully, reducing the amount of heat as you burn deeper. You want at least an inch of wood in the bottom at the end.

(Picture: bowl burned too close to edge)



**Step 8:** Dump the coals out of your bowl and put some water in it. Use a dull tool , such as a soup spoon, and scrape out as much char as you can.

**Step 9:** If you are not happy with the shape or thickness of the bowl at this time then you have options. Use a metal tool to carve deeper/wider or put more coals in and burn some more.

**Step 10:** Once the char is out, use a rough sandpaper to sand well, transitioning to smoother sandpaper.



**Step 11:** To make the bowl roughly round shaped, find somewhere to clamp it down and then saw off the square edges. (Picture above, edges sawn).