

Birch Bark Weaving

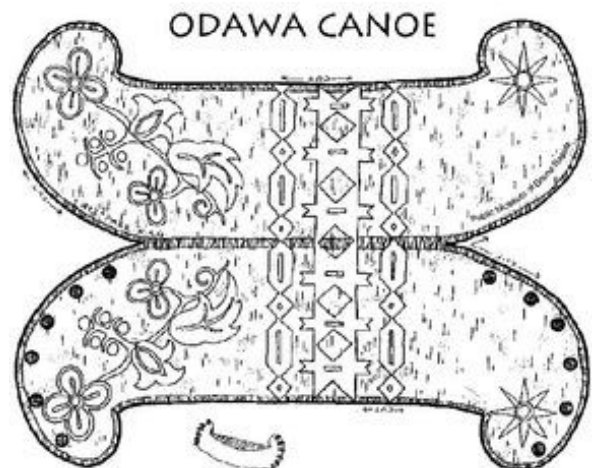
“The birch bark canoe seems to me one of the most beautiful and perfect things of the kind constructed by human art”.

-William Cullen Bryant



In this module, we will look at one of nature's most wonderful materials, birch bark. The bark of the birch has been used for centuries for far more things than you have ever imagined. To further your learning and open your eyes to what is possible try: Russian birch bark on google images.

We will cover harvesting, prepping bark and weaving. There are so many options with birch bark from baskets and quivers, to foot wear and canoes, containers, lamp covers, bowls, ornaments, hats, a never-ending list.



Other Crafts:

You can cut birch bark out just like paper and make really nice Christmas ornaments (see all the examples on page 1). The mini canoes are really simple as well. Trace the “odawa canoe” pattern on the bark (leave the center uncut), soak in water for a couple hours, cut out the shape and sew up the ends. I use a leather punch for the holes.

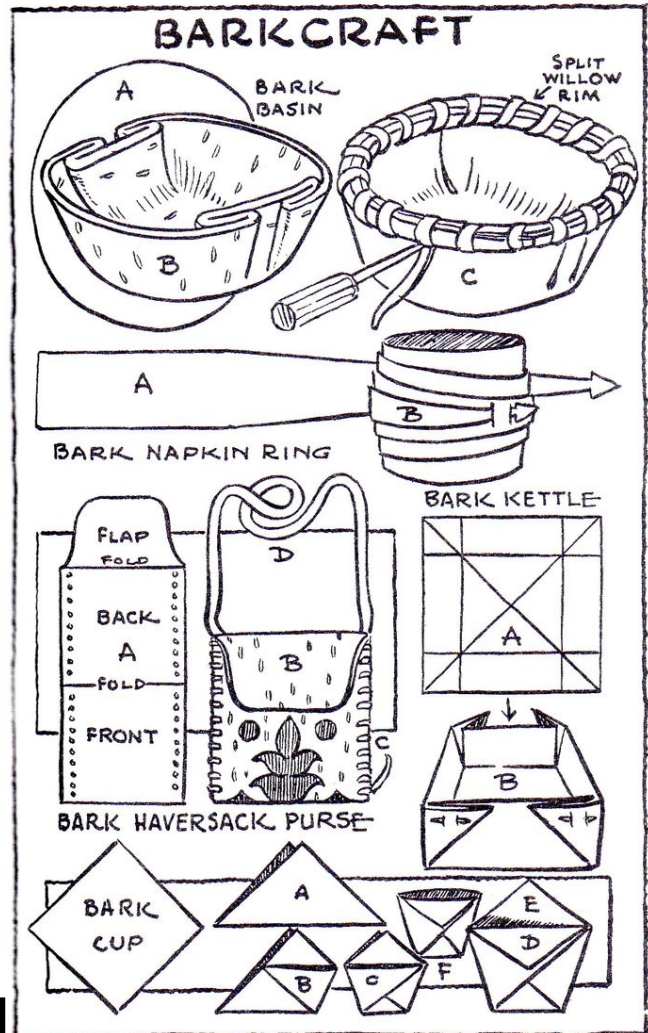
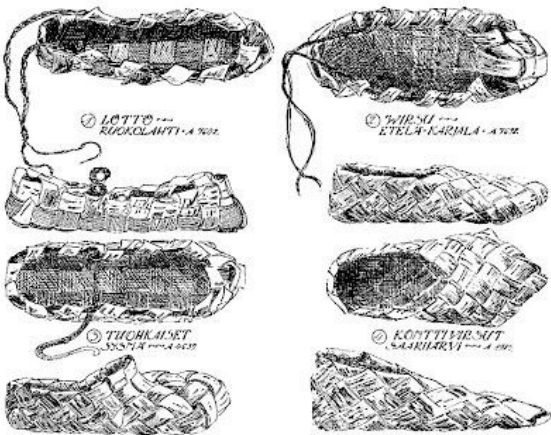


PLATE 138



A leather punch like this can be very helpful when making birchbark crafts

Supplies Needed:

- Birch bark—or construction paper
- Leather punch or awl
- Garden shears or scissors
- Leather cord or strong twine

Step 1: Harvesting

There is a common misconception that birch bark should be harvested from a living tree, but that can cause severe damage, and even kill the tree, so I don't recommend harvesting from a living tree.

All over these northern woods there is literally tons of perfectly good birch bark, laying on the ground. If you're not sure what you're looking for, check out the images below. But how do you tell what is good to use for crafts? Well fresher is better than older stuff. Older bark will be brittle, have more horizontal slashes all the way through the bark and often be grayer. Birch bark is so durable and long-lasting that the tree inside will often have rotted away or be mostly rotten. When you head out to harvest, take a sturdy knife and hatchet with you. If the bark looks good and the tree rotten inside, cut a 2 foot long section of trunk free and give a good hard shake. Often the entire inside will just dump out, leaving you a hollow cylinder.

You are going to be cutting the bark in to 1/2 inch to 1 inch wide strips so finding a downed tree with a big circumference is nice. You get longer strips to work with. Look for sections with few knots, horizontal slashes, branches, etc. Ideally, you will end up with a nice big sheet with few blemishes that is not too thick. Don't worry if it has greenish mold/growth on the outside or dirt. The beauty of birch is its layers. Inside is layer upon layer of creamy leather-like splendor. Make a big pile of bark, I like to cut the cylinders open and lay them flat. Take your knife or hatchet and clean off the insides of big chunks of inner bark/ wood. I often bring garden clippers and trim off the edges that are unusable. You should end up with a big pile of flattened bark that has been roughly cleaned.



Step 2: Trimming and prepping

For this module, we will be weaving a multi-purpose sheath. This could be for garden clippers, a knife, a pair of scissors, another favorite tool you would like to wear on our hip, etc.

To cut your birch bark, you will want a good pair of garden clippers with sharp cutting blades. Some are designed for pruning branches and have one sharp blade and then a blunt surface, these do not work well. Scissors will work but this will definitely dull them.

Cut straight strips from your birch bark sheets. Cut horizontally, rather than vertically (as if the bark were still on the tree). If you are making a sheath for a small knife you will cut them 1/2"-3/4" wide. For a pair of garden clippers you will cut them 1"-1 1/4" wide. Peel off the outer layers if they are grimy, moldy. Peel off the layers carefully as you don't want to peel to many and then have a flimsy piece of bark. If they aren't peeling easily, soak them in water first.

You might have to make a couple sheaths to get the dimensions just right. The first one is always a learner.

You will need 4 strips, the longer the better. You will also need a strip for the rim of the sheath. 18 inches or longer is a good length. Soak them in cool water for several hours or even overnight. Cut and soak more bark than you need, as some might break. Do not use hot water as it can cause the bark to curl.

Step 3: Weaving

A) Take your four strips (that have been soaking) and carefully try and fold them in the middle, if they crack or start to split, set aside for fire kindling. They should fold nicely in the middle, do your first sheath with the light bark on the outside, later you can try alternating weaves.

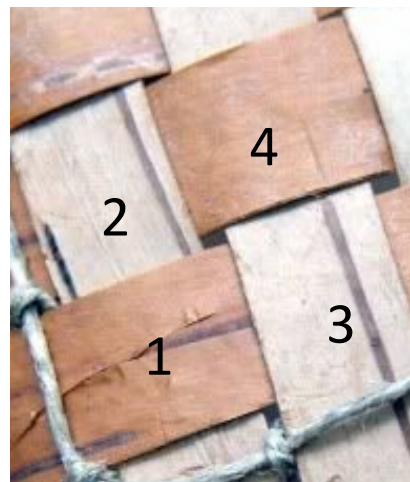
Weaving continued:

B) Take 2 folded strips and make a “V” with them, threading one strip through the other. Snug them up tight. Clothes pins or small clips can be handy. The #1 strip pointing to the right, #2 to the left is another way of putting it.

C) Take another folded strip # 3 and lay it next to #2. Now it is all about over and under. Simple and also difficult. The second strip lays beside and does the opposite of the first. So #2 went under #1, so #3 goes over #1.

D) Take the fourth strip, lay it next to #1 weave over and under, through the other strips, under #2, over #3. Still with me?

E) One way you can check yourself as you weave along, is that the sheath/pouch you are making should be open in the middle. You should be able to put an object in the middle, it is possible to accidentally weave the middle shut.



F)The hard part: Take strip #1, you are going to fold it around to the back. Again pay attention to over / under. Strip #1 is actually two strips , the top one and the bottom. The top strip just went under #3 (on the front) so now it needs to go over something. What it goes over is the #1 strip from the bottom or back side. The #1 strip from the back is now folded tightly parallel to strip #3 on the front. It now weaves over strip #4. The top #1 is now folded over on the back side of the sheath where it is woven over/under.

H) Soak your project in water if ever it seems like it is drying out or feeling brittle. You will be folding the strips a lot so it is nice if they do not crack.

I) As you make folds on the edges, you must turn the sheath over and weave on both sides.

J) Now take strip #2. The strip from the back will fold to the front and over the other #2. It should now be parallel to #4. Now weave it under #3 on the front , flip the sheath over and weave the strips on the back.

K) Now continue folding and weaving, over/under until the sheath is either as tall as you want it or you run out of material

L) You can add in a strip if you run out as well.

M) To make the top of the sheath, get another piece of birch bark, make as wide as you like, place around the top of the sheath and allow for at least 1 inch of overlap. Stretch it really tight and put a clip on it to hold in place. Mark your holes with a pencil.

N) Now you can take the top off. Use an awl or leather punch to punch holes and then sew together. Now squeeze the top of the sheath back on and adjust it til it looks good.

O) Mark and trim the top of your sheath with the top edge and then sew it in place.

O) Further additions are a belt loop and an inner sheath for knives

P) The simplest inner sheath is just a folded over piece of birch bark that fits down inside the sheath. This protects the bottom of the sheath from the point of the knife and keeps the knife snugly in place.

Check out the saami people of Scandanavia for some more birch bark masters.