

Create a Model Birch Basket

Discover a traditional way to collect and store berries!



Birch bark is waterproof and strong. Dené (Athabaskan) women traditionally used birch bark to make baskets for many purposes, including collecting berries, carrying water, and cooking.

Left: Q'iyh tth'ok (birchbark basket), ca. 1927. Smithsonian Museum of Natural History: E339747.

Materials Needed:

Birch Basket template, scissors, glue (or tape or stapler). *Optional:* Colored pom poms.

Instructions:

Step 1: Print the basket template double-sided, with the template on one side and the birch patterned paper on the other. Cut out the template along the solid line.



Step 2: Fold and crease all of the dotted lines (see picture).



Step 3: Pinch one corner together and fold it over, in the direction shown by the arrow. Repeat for the other three corners.



Step 4: Glue, tape or staple the corners together.

Hint: If you use glue, hold the corners together with paperclips until they are dry.



Step 5: Fill your basket with pom-poms or other objects to represent berries! Can you find other items to collect in your basket?

Traditional Technology: Birch Baskets

“Once you take the bark from a tree, you don’t pick the same bark again... They roll it up and keep it in a cool place until they’re ready to use it. And then when you’re ready to use it...you hold it near the heat. And that heat softens up the bark so that it can fold and bend without cracking.”

-Elder Eliza Jones, from a discussion at the Smithsonian, 2004

Indigenous people in Alaska have a long tradition of making baskets. They use baskets for many purposes, including collecting berries, storing food, carrying water, and cooking. The materials to make baskets depend on resources available in each area. In Interior Alaska, baskets are often made of birch bark.

Right: Hän women with birchbark baskets, ca 1900. *Image: UAF Archives, Charles Bunnell Collection, 1958-1026-01543.*



Athabascan woman stitching a birch bark basket. *Image: Alaska State Library, ASL-P306-1930.*

Dené (Athabascan) basket makers are aware of birch bark’s flexible quality and ability to hold water. They collect birch bark in the spring or early summer, taking only the outer layer so that the tree will survive. The bark is cut, warmed to make it flexible, folded into shape, and stitched together with split pieces of root from spruce or willow trees. Baskets are made in a variety of shapes and sizes for different purposes.

Today, many people make birch bark baskets to sell or give as gifts. Learning about resources available in the local environment, how and when to harvest, and how to make the proper folds and stitches are all part of the knowledge required to make baskets.

Right: Birch basket, ca. 1930s. *UA66-045-0001C.*



Watch a video about making birch baskets:

www.nps.gov/laci/learn/historyculture/birchbarkbaskets.htm

Winterberry Activities

Birch Basket Template



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