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Tinder for sparking rods

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- Skills and guides - Bushcraft and Survival -



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Description :

Which tinder to use with a sparking rod fire starter

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General Properties:

A tinder should be fine and hair-like in consistency, dry, and have lots of edges. There's lots of stuff both around the house and out in the bush, which can be made so. How fine the stuff has to be, how dry and how critical edges are depends on the size of the rod that you are using. A 1/2" or 3/8" rod will throw enough sparks to set a piece of birch or Kleenex on fire without shredding; smaller rods will require more preparation of tinder.

Tinder around the house:

Experiment with tissues, old rags, cotton baton, drier lint and stuff! Just beware that certain fabrics and even some kinds of cotton baton are fireproofed and just won't light. Every batch of drier lint has to be tested before trusting it for critical situations! Q-Tips work very well if they are pure cotton, especially soaked in petroleum jelly.

I found it worthwhile to get a small rod - or better still collect old disposable lighters and rip off the metal shields to get a clear spark. If the stuff will light with those you are in luck. You'll probably find that you have to shred stuff fine and chop or tear it up a bit to get lots of edges to catch the spark for those small sparks.

You'll probably want to waterproof your tinder and give it some nice flammable stuff. Just use petroleum jelly. Don't soak too thick or it won't light. If you get this situation just rub some off - same in the bush. Anti-perspirant/ deodorant sticks often work even better than petroleum jelly. All make the tinder harder to light. The important thing is to experiment - you want to do testing comfortably not out in the bush where your life may depend on getting the stuff started. You can make a science of all of this by melting paraffin or other waxes with petroleum jelly to make a less sticky result (10% wax 90% petroleum jelly) - but you don't gain much.

The ultimate tinder in that it's the only one that will work dependably with natural flint is charred cloth. You can scorch some cotton carefully in front of a heat source, or better still use an airtight tin with a nail hole in the top. Put your cotton inside, heat slowly, and ignite the gasses that come out of the hole. When the gasses stop coming out (small flame goes out) - it's done. You can't waterproof this stuff if you want it to work with natural flint.

Tinder in the Bush:

The first rule is to experiment with stuff fresh off the tree or bush. I brought in some cedar bark to test and worked with it after it had been sitting around a dry room for a while - seemed pretty simple until I had to work with it fresh off the tree where it was slightly damp! You only learn when you use the stuff fresh! You'll soon see that it pays to collect tinder before you need it and dry it out - but being able to work with fresh tinder is a vital skill.

Bark and Scraped Wood Tinder:

This is harder to prepare and start than plant fluffs but is available all year and under all weather conditions. I use either birch or red cedar bark.

There are many types of birch trees, but any with bark peeling off will do. The water birch won't work very well but since the bark does not peel readily it's easily separated from the birches that will work. Bark from the various paper birches contains oils that waterproof the bark, so that it can be prepared even when wet. Peel it, cut into very fine strips, rub between hands and you are ready to light. If you are using a thick rod, you may be able to set a whole unprepared sheet alight - but it's good to be prepared with skills to light under any circumstances. A disposable lighter with no gas or a Spark-Lite can produce just enough sparks to ignite birch if you scrape the fine outside layer of a sheet into small fragments and use this to get a flame to ignite the rest.



Recognizing paper birch is a pretty important skill since the wood is one of the few that will burn and produce a lot of heat when green. Once you find some birch trees growing in your area, take a while to just sit and look at them. Soon you'll find that you can recognize any birch tree from a considerable distance. Click on the thumbnail to see the silvery white bark, with distinctive "feathery" branches, which tend more toward vertical than straight out.



Red cedar is my favorite tinder since it is all over the place in this area. I pull off some of the stringy bark from the driest or sunniest side of the tree and the fun begins. You rub between your hands until it rubs down to a hair like consistency. Sometimes this is easier said than done and the process has to be helped with some pounding between rocks. If conditions are damp, then you help things by chopping up the result to provide more edges to catch the spark. Getting a flame varies from incredibly easy in summer to quite difficult in damp winter conditions. I appreciate having a rod that will throw lots of sparks in winter.

I haven't had a lot of luck with other barks such as cottonwood which is supposed to be great. It's just too damp to start right off the tree - at least in this damp area. I'll have to investigate further and post the results and pictures.

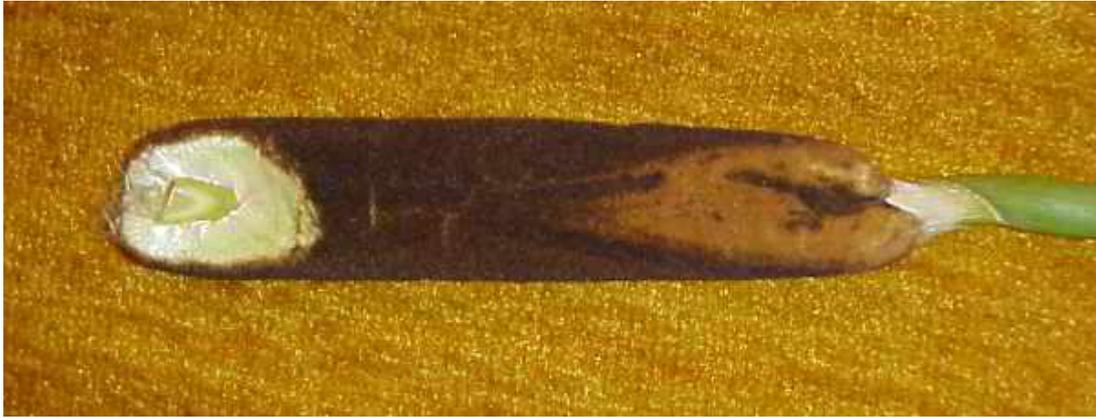
I've had varying success with scraped wood. Take some pencil shavings and rub to a dust and sure they will light

easily. In the damp bush though, things become much tougher. Sure you could just use that pencil that you have with you, but in terms of natural woods right from the tree, I've only really had luck with spruce where wood was impregnated with resin.

Plant Fluffs:

It's great fun to put a small spark onto dandelions when they are seeding and watch the ball of flame. Cottonwood, aspen, willows, fireweed, cat-tails - all produce lots of white fluffy fire starter up here so there is usually some available at most times of year. Sometimes it will be too fresh and won't hold a flame because it's still holding a lot of moisture, but there's often some trapped somewhere - even from last year's plants. All of this stuff has two shortcomings in that it's a flash tinder so you have to have something mixed with it to hold the flame. Secondly when you most need it, you'll find that it's damp from rain.





Old Man's Beard

This is the green or black lichen that looks like tufts of hair hanging from trees in the wetter areas of BC. I find it a very useful tinder - but there's a trick to its use. When it's dry it will catch a spark very easily. In any sort of damp conditions though it will absorb moisture and be impossible to start: it'll absorb moisture while sitting in your pocket. My trick is gather it when dry and rub it resin from blisters of balsam fir. You just burst the resin blisters with a sharp stick and rub it well into the old man's beard. A messy business it is too! When dry it isn't sticky and it is waterproof. You'll find out how waterproof if you use your knife and then try to clean the dried resin off. The resin is very flammable and the combination makes a superb tinder. In the following pictures notice the smooth mottled trunk with blisters, which separates balsam fir from other firs. Needles are rounded, dark green on top with whitish undersides.



Alyssa gathering balsam



OMB on trunk



Notice needles

Collecting the lichen can be hazardous in that you'll find yourself reaching too far. Just use a long forked pole. The advantage is that you can fill a shopping bag in a few minutes and soaking that much in resin can be done in 30 minutes if you find a few balsam trees growing together. Then you're set up with a LOT of tinder. This preparation also makes a great wound dressing.

Once the tinder lights..

If you have a flash tinder, you'll need some other tinder to keep the flame going. I just strips of cedar bark or birch bark to get a good flame, when using normal tinder. From then on you are into kindling split small - an axe or large knife comes in useful. The ultimate stuff to use to go from kindling to large wood is fat wood. This is just the resin impregnated wood from pine or spruce. It burns very hot and will start most stuff on fire. If a large knife or axe isn't available, the best fine kindling is fuzz stick. You can cut a lot with a comfortable handled sharp knife in a short time. Just remember that good fuzz sticks have strands that curl because they are cut very thin - easy with a very sharp knife. Conifer cones work well too.



Fat wood



baton&knife splitting

Conclusion:

One has a choice of many tinder. I like to use natural tinder and I hope that I've been able to show how to collect large amounts with little effort in good conditions for future use - or small amounts in the worst of conditions.

Post-scriptum :

Don't be shy. Email me with suggestions for improvement, comments..

Original article at [OldJimbo's site](#)