

# HOW TO MAKE A TRADITIONAL BIRCH BARK MOCUICK



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Bark Craft

Photo - extrasurvival

In the last issue I wrote the following introduction for my article about bark container:

*When working with materials provided by nature, there is always this moment that makes me struggle with the fact that often I have to 'kill' a plant or tree for my project... and when working with bark that moment certainly is there because dead trees have dead bark, which is useless for this craft. You have to use the bark of a living tree to make a bark container. Luckily these bark containers last very long, almost a lifetime.*

Luckily, in contradistinction to most other trees, birch is a fabulous tree that can regrow its bark. Even when circled all around its tree trunk!

If you make sure not to cut through the inner bark of the tree, it can recover and grow a new outer bark again. Of course the tree will be 'ugly' for the time of regrowth and it will take a long time during which the tree will be vulnerable. But it will regrow as long as the inner bark is left intact.

Don't misunderstand me, this is not an invitation to cut birchbark in great quantities! Try to find a place where there are lots of birch trees to keep the impact limited. And gather only what you need! If you have the possibility, take bark from a freshly fallen tree or from fresh timber logging.

## HARVESTING THE BARK

Look for a tree that has a big patch of that white and smooth bark, avoid the dark crusty bits. Every birch is different, it is worth to have a look at several trees. If you have to cut into a standing living tree you may look for one that offers more than one patch of bark. **Before you cut into a tree, make double sure that it really has the right bark!**

**Winter bark**, just before the leaves come out. This bark is thicker and brown from the inside. More difficult to harvest.

**Summer bark**, any time in spring or summer. This bark is thinner and lighter/yellow from the inside.



Cut a straight vertical line through the outer bark of the tree from as high as possible downwards.



At the lowest and highest point make a cut sideways around the tree.

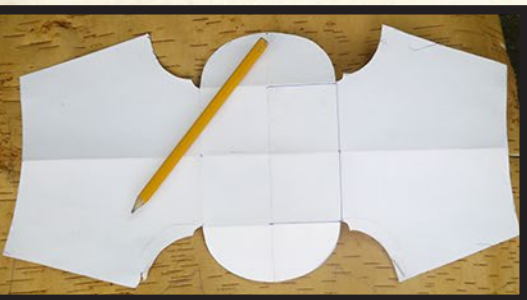


Slide your knife and later on a small wooden wedge under the cut and carefully peel the bark from the tree. (This is a beautiful example of summerbark, yellow and shiny.)



# CRAFTING THE CONTAINER

Draw the pattern on a piece of thick paper (folding lengthwise will help to get the pattern symmetrical). Any variation in size and shape of this pattern will work, so feel free to design your own. Mine is about 35cm long and 18cm wide.



Cut the pattern and see if it works (clothes pegs will do a great job at this point). If necessary adjust your pattern. You will also get a 'preview' of the size of your container this way.



Soak the piece of bark in hot water for a few minutes. The bark will get softer and more pliable. This prevents tearing the bark.

Trace the pattern on the birchbark and cut along the lines. Often birchbark has lots of small loose shavings that come off easily. Now is the best moment to remove them. Pull your finger or a blunt knife over the bark until it is smooth and clean.



Now fold one side into place, hold tight and make two holes with an awl through both layers of bark. Make sure you support the bark at the back with your fingers while punching.

To keep the bark in place insert a small wooden peg in each hole. I often use hawthorns for this.





Make 2 or 3 more holes in between the earlier two holes and start stitching. You may use rootlets or bark from lime, willow, elm. I used lime bark here. Any stitching pattern will work.

Pull each stitch tight but be careful not to tear the bark.

Repeat this with the other side of the container. Now it should look more or less like this:



Fold the round under parts upwards to meet the sides of your container, make holes and sew like you did before. One side at a time. The bottom of your container is finished.



Now start with the rim:

You will either need:

- to split a willow branch lengthwise in two, a bit longer than the outline of your basket. The split branch should be thick enough to stabilize the rim without denting it.
- or a strip of birchbark about the same length and as wide as suits your container.



If you use a split willow branch:

Place one split branch inside the rim. This can be quite a struggle and clothes pegs are very handy.



The second split willow branch will go around the outside of the rim. Take one clothes peg off at a time, get the split willow branch in place, put the clothes peg back on and move on to the next one. After some 'not so nice words' you will have everything in place:



If you use the birchbark strip only:

You may place the strip around the rim with clothes pegs or just hold it in place and start with the sewing immediately.

The easiest way to get the rim fixed is to sew through the layers of birchbark or over both willow branches with a simple overhand stitch.

I used a more complicated variation on the overhand stitch that has an artistic touch and makes the rim stronger too. Any sewing pattern of following up and down will work, as long as you do not stitch twice right next to each other at the same height. That would tear the bark.





Now your container itself is finished. If you want a lid, this is how I make them.

Cut two disks of seasoned wood. Carve one in shape to fit into the container and leave the other a little bit bigger in diameter.



To taper the inner edge of the lid, draw a line around the side and a circle on the disk. Then trim the wood between the lines.



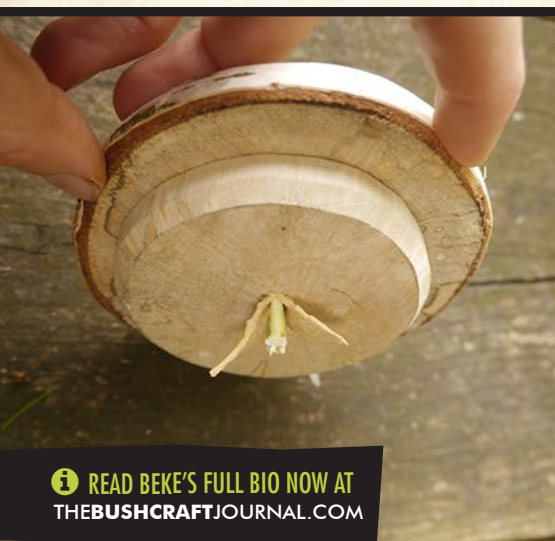
Cut a small wedge and a strip of leather. Drill a hole through both wooden disks and pull the leather strip through creating a pull loop.



Trim off the extending leather and wedge.

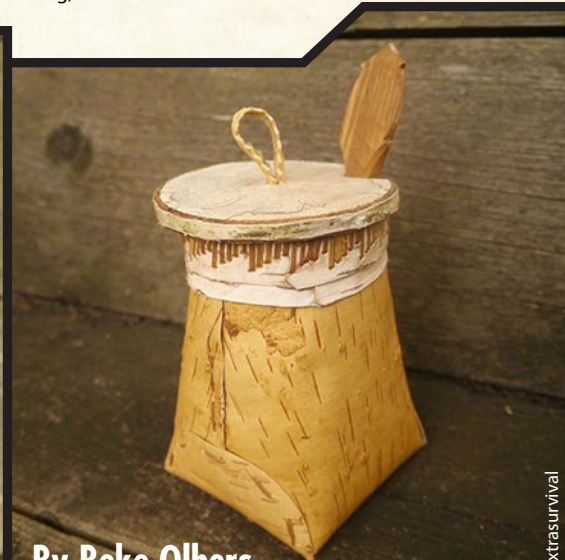


Bang the wedge between the two ends of the leather strip to secure the pull loop. This will hold the two disks together permanently.



The finished container became our sugar pot at home (with a spoon I received as a gift from Jon Mac, ***spooncarvingfirststeps***, at the Wilderness Gathering).

As I mentioned at the beginning, you can design any shape of container in the same way; small and big, wide or narrow.



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