Birch Bark Baskets Activity
Grades K-4
Teacher Guide

Background Information

Birch bark baskets have been a staple of First Nations basket making since time immemorial. The procedure of making these baskets has been passed down through the generations and remains a part of many cultures. In northern interior British Columbia, the baskets can be used for practical purposes but are also used to highlight the skill and artistry of the maker.

In British Columbia, birch bark basketry originated in the interior due to the presence of Paper Birch trees (*Betula papyrifera*), from which sheets of birch bark could be removed and worked. The basket maker, usually a woman, would first choose a tree for its bark. She would cut through the bark to the tree’s sapwood using a stone tool. She would then pry the bark loose with her hands or by using a tool made of stone or bone. She then gathered up the bark strips she had collected.

Birch bark working and basket making has a long history and examples of perforated birch bark and containers have been excavated in archaeological digs around the province. The fact that it has been used continuously for many thousands of years tells us how important it is to the people working with birch bark. Birch bark was, and still is, used for anything from cooking, to storing, medicines, clothing, and construction materials. Anything that we use plastic containers for today, ancient peoples could have used birch bark.

There are many different ways to create a birch bark basket, the pattern used in this activity was chosen due to its ease in construction for young students. The activity can easily be altered to accommodate different patterns and methods of making the construction paper basket. Traditionally, the baskets would have been made in the steps below, with additional steps to make them water tight. This activity is meant to highlight the idea of making a birch bark basket for young students who will get an idea of the process. This activity can be adapted for use with older students where the students go and collect birch bark and make traditional birch bark baskets.

For more information about the use of birch bark see the Museum’s website:
Step by Step Instructions

Step 1: Take a piece of construction paper and the stencil and cut out the design from the stencil onto your construction paper. Cut the triangles out of the sides and use a hole punch to create the holes.

Step 2: Starting on one of the short ends of the paper, fold both sides into the center and align all of the holes. When they are all aligned, put a paper clip on the top to hold it in place.
Step 3: Repeat step 2 on the other short side of the paper and paper clip.

Step 4: Take your string and string it through the 4 holes that are aligned starting on one end of the basket, then repeat on the other side. Remove the paper clips and you have a free standing paper basket.
Step 5: cut the excess off of the top of the basket so it is flat across the top.
Step 6: (Optional) Punch holes along the top edge and string twine or pipe cleaners around the top to simulate the finishing technique of the traditional baskets.

Step 7: (Optional) Decorate the outsides of the baskets with drawings, symbols and whatever they like.

Materials Needed

Construction Paper
String or twine
Clothes pins, two per student
Pipe cleaners (optional)
Crayons or markers (optional)

Discussion Points

Birch bark basket making was and still is a skill that is handed down through the generations. How would they teach someone to make these baskets? Why? Who?

Birch bark baskets were water tight and used for cooking, storing, collecting, and anything that we would use a plastic bucket for today. Think about what could be cooked in these baskets, what could be collected, what could be stored?
What can you use your basket for in your life today? What if it was made of birch bark?

**Conversation Questions**

What kinds of designs did you put on your basket, why?

Have you made birch bark baskets before? Does anyone in your family? Who?

Can you think of any other patterns that could be folded into a basket?
Additional Templates

Two different styles of baskets have been provided. Students are encouraged to try to design and produce their own basket(s).
Template 2