

Wonders Within Wood

CARVING AND DESIGN

PARENT OVERVIEW AND INSTRUCTIONS

Lesson Series Guide

This series is meant for 5th grade and up. It is designed for trusted caregivers and young people to complete together at home, with intentional connection and community building happening in an online space.

Part of what makes this lesson special is how we plan the experience. We take time to think about the many different life skills and goals we can help youth achieve while focusing on a project topic like green wood carving. Specifically, there will be opportunities to look into the past, connect with others who enjoy carving, and think artistically about green wood.

Take time to read through and explore the lesson together. Before engaging in the carving aspect, review the knife recommendation handout.

This lesson set requires fine motor skills and hand control. Please be present at all times to guide your youth as they encounter and practice their carving skills.



Objectives:

- Youth will explore several historical and cultural wood carving traditions.
- Youth will compare and contrast early wood carving practices with those of today.
- Youth will investigate the difference between green wood and dry wood.
- Youth will practice selecting and harvesting sticks for carving.
- Youth will gain basic carving skills and create a wooden flower.

Wonders Within Wood

CARVING AND DESIGN



Safety Reminder

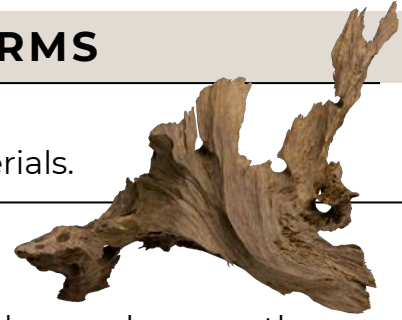
Wood carving requires patience, practice, and control. Youth may need to attempt carving flowers multiple times before they are successful. Always supervise your youth as they attempt to carve. Refer to the instructional video listed in Section 3: pause and re-watch where needed, and refer to the video transcript in the description to get a full grasp.



SECTION 1: SHAPING THE FIRST FORMS

Lesson Objectives:

Youth will explore the past as it relates to carving.
Youth will gain awareness of how to manipulate materials.



Imagine

“Long ago, someone might have found a fallen tree with twisted branches and a smooth, pale surface. Maybe it looked like a bird, a fish, or a wild animal. That moment could have been the first time a person saw nature as art. A strange rock by the river might have reminded them of a face—funny, mysterious, or even magical. Over time, people learned they could shape wood with simple tools, turning branches into useful things and beautiful objects. Nature didn’t just give them materials—it gave them ideas.”

Looking to the Past

Have you ever paused to think about the moment when people started to create carvings for the first time? Take a minute and imagine what that may have looked like. What tools and materials do you think they had?



The items at the top: rocks, bones, teeth, and tusks were readily available resources for ancient peoples to begin to create art with. However, it also depended on where they lived.



Wood and fiber were more difficult to find for people who lived in the Ice Age; it was really cold! Trees and fibers for weaving and basket making were found more in the south until the weather started to change.



Pause and consider: What would it feel like to be inspired by nature and your surroundings? Grab this blank page and a pencil. Head outside to observe and draw natural things around you that you could potentially use to make art. What is the weather like? How does this affect what you can see or use? Do you see some of the faces or creatures suggested in the “Imagine” story? Try to recreate them here.

Connection to Today

Where people lived and what they had access to impacted their carvings. So did people's cultures, beliefs, and other habits. What do you think carving would have looked like in communities over 12,000 years ago? Write down or sketch out your thoughts.

Who did they make carvings for?

Who do you think made the carvings and why?

What did they carve?

How did they learn and teach others to carve?

Are their designs simple or intricate?

Perhaps you sketched out a carved piece that still exists today, or used your imagination to create something completely new. Either way, we can understand the value, time, and artistry that went into designing and carving the piece. What value do we place on hand-carved products today?

Connection to Today, Continued

Have you worked with wood before in any way? You have most likely used a wooden pencil or piece of wooden furniture. Set a timer for 5 minutes and explore your living area. How many pieces of wood can you find? Is it more artistic or practical/useful?

Write down what wooden object you found to be the most useful in everyday life:

Write down what wooden object you find to be the most artistic or decorative:

When you look at the artistic or decorative piece, think about the questions below. Feel free to jot down your thoughts:

Does it have a connection to your family?

How old is the piece?

Is the design simple or intricate?

What aspects of the piece speak to you?



Explore More:

-Chinese boxwood in Yueqing, China is very rare because the tree only grows about 6 inches every 40-50 years. Because of this, the wood resembles buttery ivory. The earliest known carvings are from 1342 CE.

<https://go.wisc.edu/901831>



-Did you know that Lake Mendota in Madison, WI is home to ancient canoes? One is estimated to be over 5000 years old? Now that's a big carving project!

<https://go.wisc.edu/04abky>

- What other ancient carvings can you find in an online search?

-Is there a valued carving that is well known in your community?

Action Into Art

Everyone has the ability to create unique and original designs. Designing is the process of developing an idea or concept into visual shape and form using materials, in this case, wood. If specific procedures are followed to change these ideas into shapes, the process of designing has begun.

Design ideas grow out of the many personal experiences we've had, both past and present. They are the results of our environment, the communities we live in, and the ability to see, to hear, to touch, to feel, to smell, and to taste the world around us. The more sensitive we are to our environment and surroundings, the more creative we can be in the development of design ideas. Let's practice honing our skills by observing how natural shapes occur and how to manipulate objects into certain shapes. This will help you begin to visualize carving.

Step 1: Go find three or four interestingly shaped stones about the size of your fist.

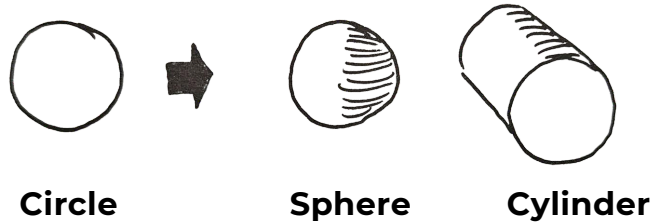
Step 2: Study them carefully; now close your eyes and move your fingers over each stone to get the feeling of the surfaces. Can you feel the gently rounded sides? Choose one rock that is particularly interesting to you and work to draw it in the space below. Use arrows to indicate how the rock's lines flow.



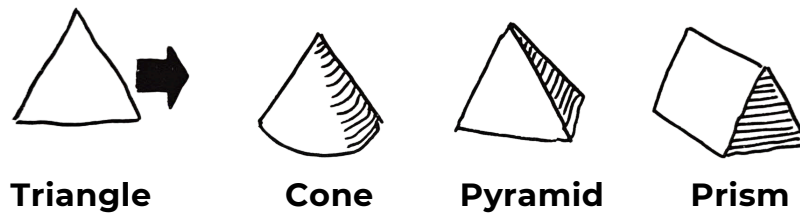
Action Into Art, Continued

Step 3: Take out your cup of playdough. When we touch and feel the dough with our fingers, we can easily change the direction of the surface. We can shape it as we wish into many kinds of surfaces we remember seeing in stones, or the smooth branches and limbs of trees. All this is important in determining what we intend to do with a surface later when we use the carving knife on sticks.

Triangles, circles, ovals, squares, and rectangles drawn on paper take on different forms when molded into solid form. Roll and shape your playdough into a cylinder with your fingers. How would you shape the ends of a cylinder to get it flat?



Now try making a piece of playdough into a cone. This is much harder to do. Can you make a long narrow cone and a short cone?



From these experiments, can you see that these shapes are similar to one of the stones you chose? All of these experiments are similar to the studies of many sculptors and industrial designers. They test and try out their ideas on soft clay before they begin to work in the harder materials, such as wood.

Next, let's explore what is happening inside trees and how it affects carving them, as we transition from soft clay to solid objects.

SECTION 2: UNDERSTANDING WOOD

Lesson
Objectives:

Youth will learn about green woodworking.
Youth will identify the characteristics of wood.

Imagine

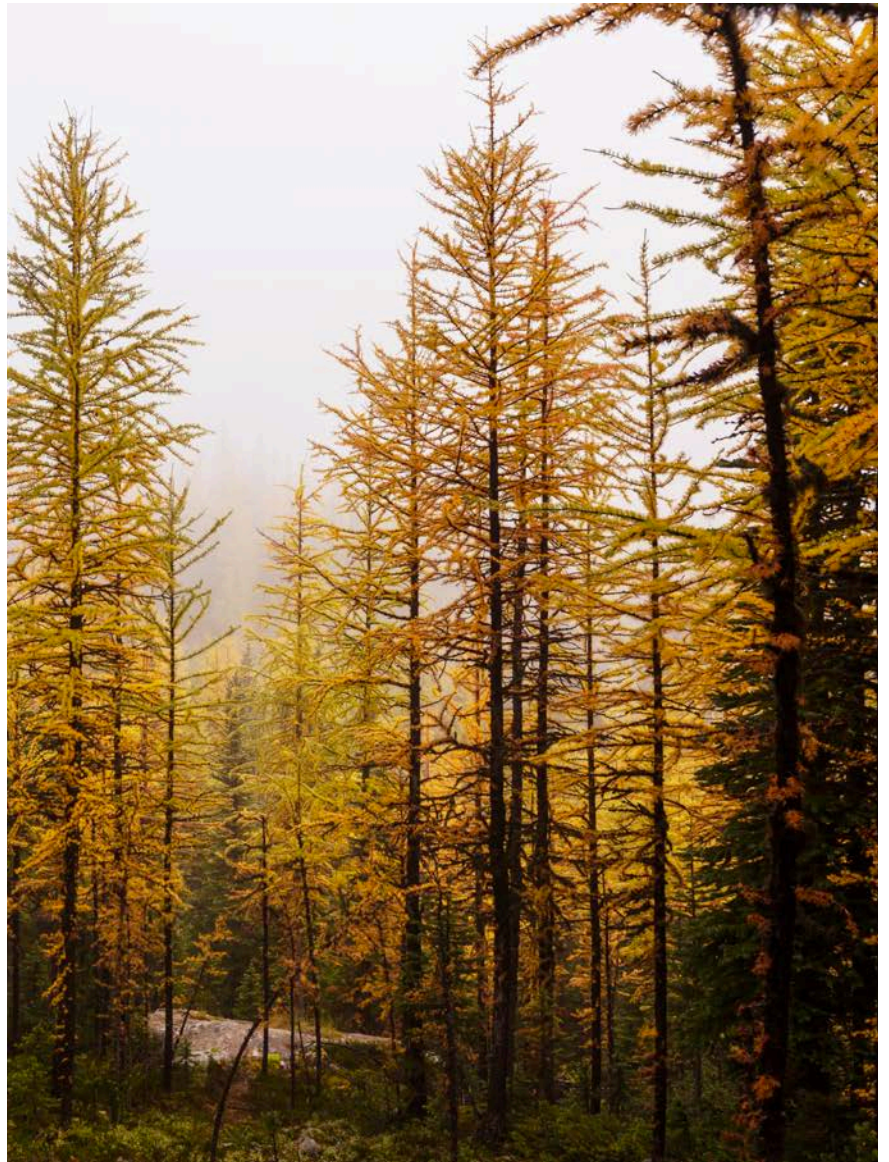
Deep in the past, as the ice melted and forests grew, an artist stood before a tall larch tree, wondering how to shape the feelings of a changing world. With careful hands, they carved faces, eyes, and patterns into the wood, maybe to tell stories, maybe to protect their people, or maybe just to make sense of the strange new land. No one knows for sure what they meant, but the statue they made—now called the Shigir Idol—still stands today, whispering secrets from 12,000 years ago.

Looking to the Past

The larch tree grows in colder, northern regions, including Russia, where the Shigir Idol was found deep in a peat bog. Larches can reach up to 195 feet tall! The artist or artists of the Shigir Idol harvested and carved a tree with several different tools. We believe that it may have only been possible for them to carve the tree at the time because it was green wood.

Green wood is wood that has been freshly cut from a tree and still contains a lot of its natural moisture, or sap. Because the wood is full of water, it's softer and easier to shape with tools. Their tools probably would not have been able to carve on dried wood.

Take a moment and do an online search: green wood vs. dry wood. Write down the similarities and differences you discover for each on the next page.



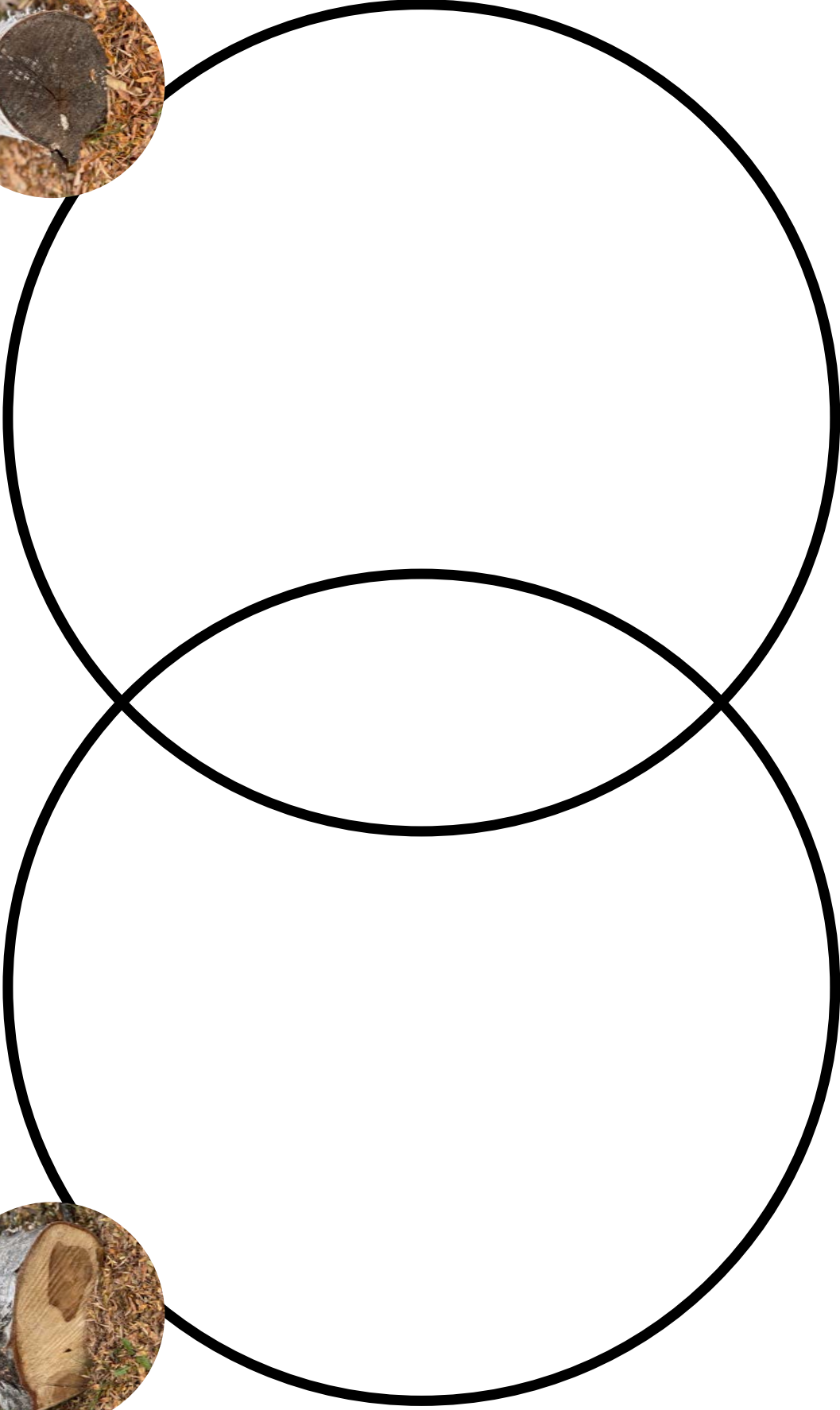
Above: Larch Trees
Shigir Idol: <https://go.wisc.edu/8nz2ny>



Dry Wood



Similarities



Green Wood



Connection to Today

Logs and limbs that are freshly cut can take months to years to dry out depending on their size and species. Larger logs have more moisture that has to move further through the wood to evaporate. Bark can also slow wood from drying. As wood dries, it shrinks, causing it to change shape and potentially crack. That is why most woodworking today uses dry, 'seasoned' wood before using it for things like furniture or building.

So, why work with green wood now? Here are some reasons:

Easy to work with hand tools because green wood is softer.

Wood that is cut into boards takes a long time to be dry and green wood can be worked with immediately.

Green wood can often be found for free or very little cost.

Working with green wood can be done with more affordable tools.

Green woodworking generally produces wood chips, which are a very useful byproduct.



Explore More:

-Shrink pots are ingenious creations! They originated in Northern Europe. It was a way to create containers with green wood. As green wood dries and shrinks, it clamps tightly together, creating a pot! Take some time to learn about these and how green woodworkers are making them today!

<https://go.wisc.edu/1o7ad4>



-The leftover shavings from green wood carving can be used to grow your own mushrooms. Look into 'mushroom inoculation.'



Connection to Today, Continued

Time to head out to a green space near you.

Step 1: Find a dry branch or piece of wood.

- Does it bend or snap?

- Hold the piece of wood to your cheek. Does it feel cold?

- Tap the piece of wood and sniff it. Write down your observations.



Step 2: Find some green wood.

- Does it bend or snap?

- Hold the piece of wood to your cheek. Does it feel cold?

- Tap the piece of wood and sniff it. Write down your observations.

Action Into Art

Green wood is softer and easier to carve than dry wood. However, no matter what kind of wood we use, the way we carve depends on the fibers inside the wood. Green wood may look solid, but it is actually made of tiny fibers that run in long, straight lines. These fibers stretch all the way from the tree's roots up to its canopy. Think of them like straws bundled together. These tube-like fibers give wood its strength, flexibility, and the special look we recognize in tree rings. When you cut across a tree trunk, you can see circles called rings.

Because the fibers run in parallel groups, wood often splits along them. At first, this might seem like a weakness, but it's actually one of the reasons wood is so useful! Splitting along the fibers makes wood easier to shape with simple tools.



Let's copy these fibers by using perler beads.

Materials Needed:

- Perler beads in three colors (light, medium, dark)
- Masking tape
- Parchment paper and clothing iron (with adult help)

Step 1: Create the sticky board to hold your beads by layering masking tape into a sheet. Then tape your sheet down to your worktable.



Step 2: Think about your colors.

- Medium and light colors represent ring growths
- The darkest color represents bark, where the newest growth occurs

Start in the center. Place beads in a small circle using one color. This represents the oldest fibers of the tree. You may need to grab a pair of tweezers if you're having difficulty moving and placing the beads. Remember, tree rings are not perfectly round!

Action Into Art, Continued

Step 3: Build the next ring. Around the first circle, add a ring of different-colored beads. This shows the tree growing stronger as fibers add on. This project may take you a bit. Feel free to think about these questions or chat with others as you work.

What common designs or symbols do you see in your home community? What do they mean, and why are they used?

Do you know anyone who makes things by hand? Wood or otherwise?

Why do you think people practice carving items when they could just buy them?

Step 4: Finish with the outer ring. Add a ring of dark-colored beads around the outside. This represents the bark.

Step 5: Fuse the beads. With adult help, cover the beads with parchment paper and gently iron until they melt together. Let it cool, then peel everything off, and you'll have a coaster that looks like a tree's cross-section!



SECTION 3: CARVING COMMUNITY

Lesson Objectives:	Youth will responsibly harvest green wood sticks. Youth will carve a wooden flower.
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Community

When you think about the word community, what comes to mind? Perhaps you think about a group of people who live in the same place, but it can also mean a feeling of connection with others, as a result of sharing a common interest. There is a community of carvers worldwide who share the same passion for working with green wood. Take a moment and think about a community that you are a part of:

What is something similar that everyone cares about?

What characteristics best describe your community?

Here are some links to connect with active green wood carving communities in Wisconsin:

The Driftless Folk School always has a Spoon Gathering each fall: <https://www.driftlessfolkschool.org/>

The Harry Whitehorse International Wood Sculpture Festival: <https://www.harrywhitehorse.com/festival/>



Action Into Art

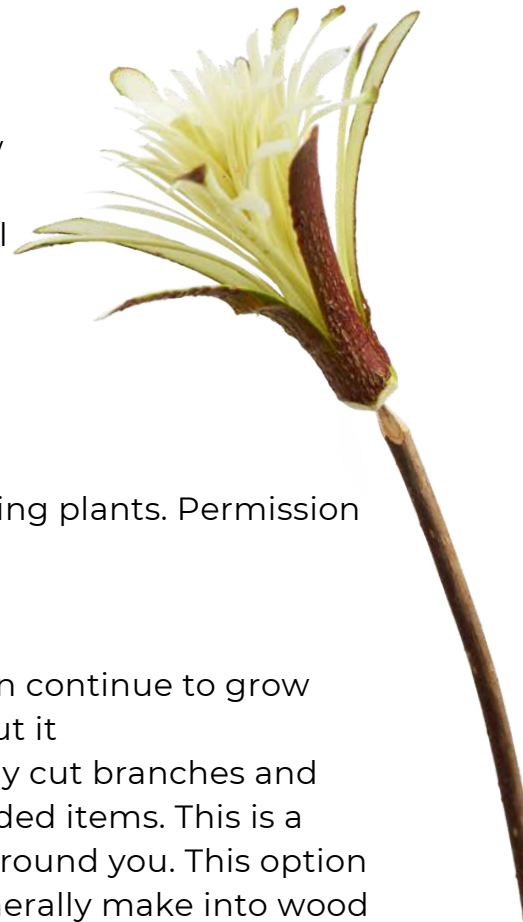
Most of the time, green wood carving is done without the use of power tools. Many people in the green wood carving community talk about how calming and meditative the process is. Remember molding your playdough and thinking about slowly manipulating shapes? Did you feel focused and relaxed?

People in the green wood carving community also value how it connects them to those who lived long ago. They have a link or relationship with the ancient peoples who carved the Shigir Idol, made pinch pots, and even with those who crafted with Yueqing boxwood.

We hope that you have learned a lot about yourself, how a single interest can connect people across generations and the world, and how wood is structured. It's time to carve your flower and join the community!

Action Into Art, ctd.

This carving project calls for a green wood stick that is roughly $\frac{3}{8}$ inch thick. Dogwood (silky or red osier) is a great option and is a very prevalent shrub that often grows in low areas where water collects. In winter it's easy to spot due to its bright red bark and is often found along ditches and trail sides where brush is cut back to maintain wooded areas or passages. Dogwood is also a common plant in residential yards due to its interesting year-round appeal.



There are things to keep in mind for harvesting:

- You should always ask for permission before cutting living plants. Permission from a property owner or manager is important.
- If you are collecting sticks from a living plant:
 - Do not take more than you need
 - Do not take more than half of the plant so that it can continue to grow
 - If it doesn't feel right to cut the plant, then do not cut it

Your area may have a site where people can drop off freshly cut branches and yard waste. These may be open for you to gather your needed items. This is a way to recycle and be sustainable with natural resources around you. This option is a good way to repurpose wood that yard waste sites generally make into wood chips for mulch or compost.

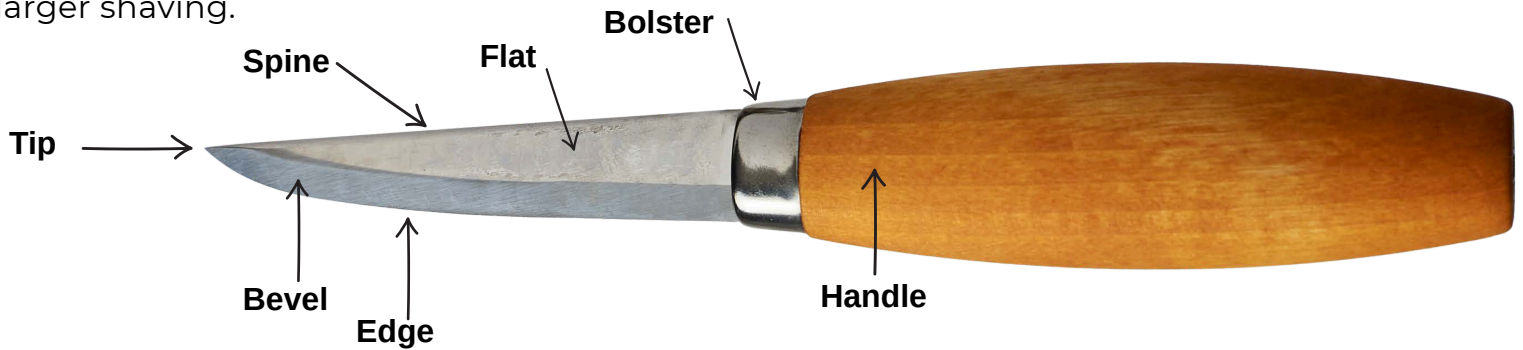
Let's get started, head to our video to learn how to carve a flower with green wood carver, Derek!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptvEXF_2qNQ



INSERT: CARVING KNIVES

How Carving Knives Work

Knives are basically a wedge with a sharp edge. The sharp edge cuts the fibers and the bevels of the knife push the wood shaving away from the workpiece. A thin cut makes a small shaving with a small amount of force. A thicker cut requires more force to produce a larger shaving.



How To Choose Your Carving Knife

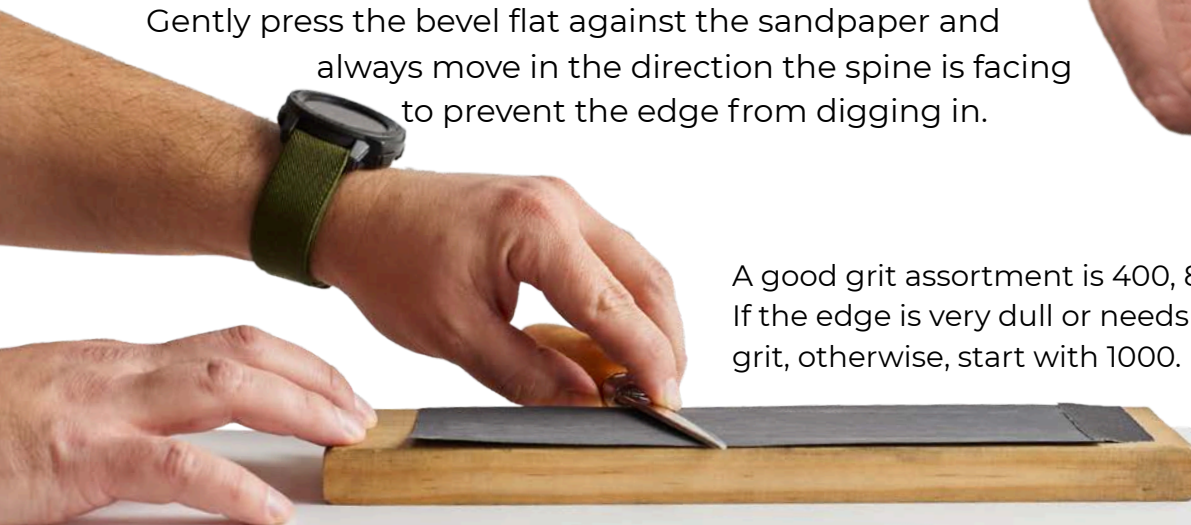
A carving knife should be easy to use, and more importantly, easy to maintain. You can use a knife specifically for carving, or any kind of pocket-knife will work, as long as it cuts cleanly. First, make sure that it is comfortable to hold and wide enough that your fingertips are not pressed painfully into your palm. Choose a knife that has a slim blade. Morakniv, based in Sweden, makes affordable carving knives. Their 120 and 106 knives are designed for wood carving and have a large flat bevel that is easy to maintain.

How To Care For Your Carving Knife

Maintaining a flat bevel on both sides of the knife is important for making smooth and long shavings. One way to sharpen flat bevels is to use wet-dry sandpaper on a flat wood block. Wet-dry comes in many grits. Low number grit makes large scratches and removes more metal, which is useful for repairing a damaged edge. Moving to higher grit numbers will polish the bevels and make the cutting edge sharp.

Gently press the bevel flat against the sandpaper and always move in the direction the spine is facing to prevent the edge from digging in.

A good grit assortment is 400, 800, 1000, 1500, 2000. If the edge is very dull or needs repairs, start with 400 grit, otherwise, start with 1000.



Wonders Within Wood

CARVING AND DESIGN

SUPPLY LIST

You will need the following supplies:

Section 1:

- Playdough (provided in kit)
- Pencil for drawing
- Rocks--see activity before gathering

Section 2:

- Perler beads in three colors (provided in kit)
- Masking tape
- Parchment paper
- Clothing iron
- Tweezers (optional)

Section 3:

- Carving knife
- Green wood sticks ~3/8" diameter
- Bamboo skewers

Please note that all of the sections have an outdoor component, where the youth are invited to head out and explore. They will need to find green wood and dry wood to carry out their experiments.



Wonders Within Wood

CARVING AND DESIGN

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