Artist: Acho Dene Native Crafts
Photo Credit: BDIC

Once the basket and willow strips are dry, the sticks are removed. Seams are sewn with pliable spruce roots, securing the basket in its shape.

An awl is used to punch holes around the top of the basket and the rim of the lid. Using spruce roots, the bent willow strips are sewn into place adding strength to the basket and lid. The length of the stitches may be staggered to create a design. When the row of stitches is completed, the end of the root is tucked and secured under a stitch.

Strips of moosehide can be used to add finishing touches to the basket. They are used to tie the lid closed and are sometimes used for handles on the basket for easy carrying.

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Northwest Territories Industry, Tourism and Investment

Recycled Paper

Birchbark Baskets

From Canada's Northwest Territories

Photo Credit: Tessa Macintosh

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Photo Courtesy: BDIC

These beautiful hand crafted baskets are works of art sought by collectors all over the world.

For many centuries, Dene women from the Fort Liard area have been using bark from local birch trees to make beautiful baskets.

Birchbark Baskets

The natural waxes in birchbark make it waterproof and rot resistant. Spruce gum can be put on the seams to seal a basket for carrying water. Clay mixed with dried grass can be applied to the inside of a basket to allow it to be used as a cooking pot. Lids can be added to these versatile baskets to prevent spills and allow them to be used to store food, carry tools and bait, or hold berries, among many other things.

The world famous birchbark baskets of Fort Liard are skillfully hand crafted. Each birchbark basket is uniquely designed and decorated according to the maker's individual vision and creativity.

The Bark

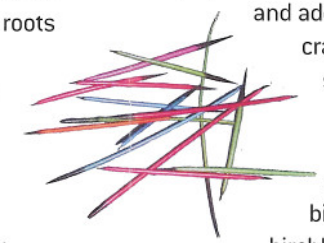
Late spring or early summer is the best time to harvest birchbark. It is easier to peel when the sap is running and the moisture is just right. A vertical cut about three feet long is made in the tree and a ring of bark is carefully peeled from around the tree. The brown inner bark is left on so the peeling does not cause any harm to the tree.

The peeled bark is very light and pliant. It is rolled with the inside out, and tied with a string. It must be stored in a cool place or frozen so it does not dry out.

The Roots

Roots from the spruce tree are used for sewing birchbark baskets. Long, straight roots are easier to split and more efficient to sew with. Medium-sized trees with long, very straight limbs usually have straight roots.

A rainy day in June is an ideal time to harvest spruce roots. This is when the bark is the easiest to peel. Roots with red bark are the best. They are young and strong. Black roots are old and break easily. The roots are coiled and stored in a plastic bag to keep them moist. They can be dried and stored if not needed right away.



Making the Basket

Before work can begin on the basket, all the materials must be prepared. The spruce roots are soaked overnight. After they are softened, they need to be split. Starting at the thick end, a knife is used to split the root all the way down. The bark is peeled off and the bare root is split in half again. Any knots are cut away as they will break later anyway. The end of the root is sharpened to a point for sewing and the roots are placed back in the water to keep them moist until they are needed.

Red willow branches are used to hold the shape of the basket. Thin branches are gathered and the bark peeled off. They are evenly trimmed with a knife, coiled and soaked in water.

The outer layer of the birchbark is gently scraped with a knife to remove the knots and peeling layers of bark.

The birchbark is then rubbed with sandpaper to give it a smooth finish. The more the bark is scraped and sanded, the fewer lines remain. Varying the amount of sanding creates contrasting strips of birchbark, which can be used to decorate the basket.

The birchbark is then cut into the shape of the basket. If the basket is to be decorated with quillwork, a pattern is drawn on the bark. Holes are then punched with an awl and coloured quills are added one at a time. The preparation and dyeing of the quills is time consuming and add to the immense efforts needed for this craft. Another decorative technique involves scraping through the layers of bark. This produces a design that stands out against the background as different shades of bark are exposed. Birchbark biting and using contrasting strips of birchbark to trim the borders are other decorative techniques. All decorating is completed before the basket is sewn together.

The birchbark is then dampened with a wet cloth and held over a fire to soften it. When it is softened, an awl is used to then punch stitching holes. The birchbark is folded according to the basket pattern and small wooden sticks are inserted into the holes to hold the shape as the birchbark dries. Two moist strips of willow are wrapped along the inside and outside of a basket top and allowed to dry. To make a lid, a piece of birchbark is cut in the correct shape. A piece of willow is shaped to fit inside the rim of the lid and allowed to dry.