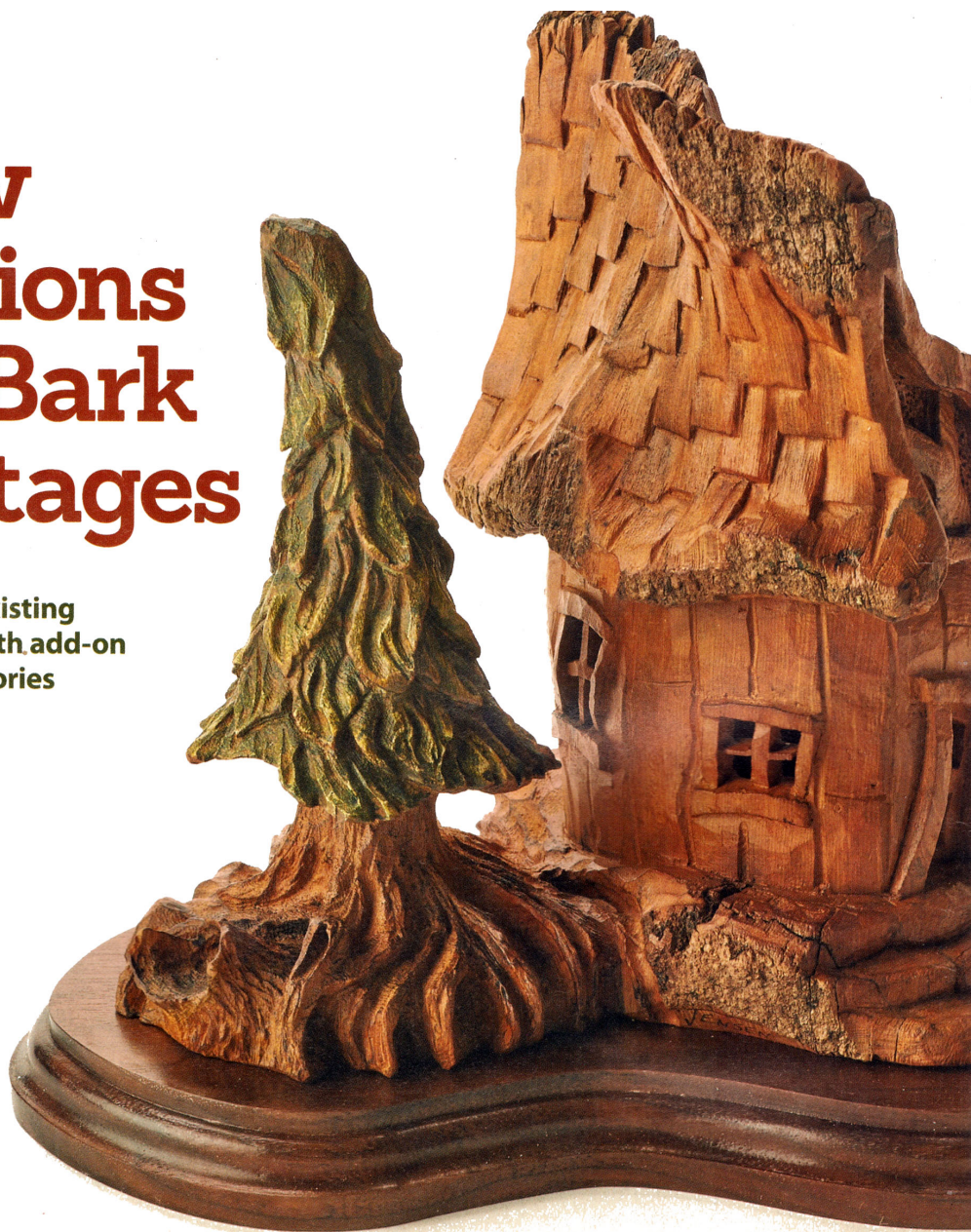


New Options for Bark Cottages

Enhance an existing bark house with add-on carved accessories

By Rick Jensen



You can sometimes find thick pieces of cottonwood bark, but because of the way it grows, it's difficult to find wide pieces. As I push myself to do new and interesting things with bark, I have found the width of bark limiting. So, I've developed a few sure-fire methods of seamlessly attaching add-ons to bark houses.

Additionally, I've spent some time refining my power-carving techniques for bark. While I love carving with edged tools, I find that power carving is easier on my body. With the wide variety of bits and bit shapes available, I've found

that I can carve things with power that I could never carve with edged tools.

Hand Positions for Power Carving

When power carving, you need to hold your carving and tools a bit differently. Keep your elbows tight against your body. Try to anchor the hand holding the carving onto a bench. Anchor the tool-holding hand against a bench and preferably against the work piece. That way, when the blank moves, the hand holding the tool moves in tandem. This body and work position increases your control and accuracy.



6 Refine the layers of branches. Use a super-coarse bud-shaped rUBY bit to taper the top of each layer down so it looks like it fits under the branches above it. Start at the top and work your way down. Taper each layer up to the bottom of the outline groove. Add a slight curve to each layer.



7 Undercut the layers of branches. Use a smaller flame-shaped super-coarse rUBY bit. The tip of the smaller bit fits in under the branches to help separate the layer from the one above it. Refine the top of the branches to create a slight upward curl at the tips with a smaller super-coarse bud-shaped rUBY bit.



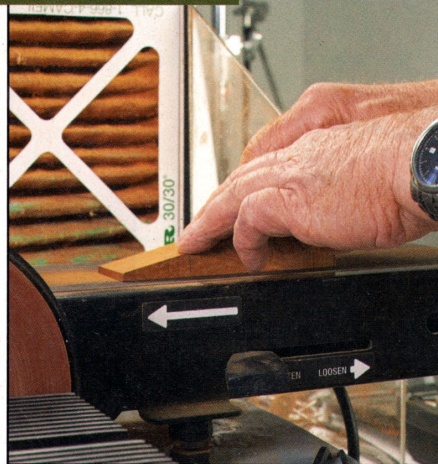
8 Buff the carving. I use a piece of red Scotchbrite 7740 pad in a mandrel. Run the tool at a low speed. This smooths and softens the branches without changing the overall shape. I use it mainly to remove the fuzzies left by the other bits. Then, scrub the piece with a denture brush to remove the dust.



9 Divide the branch layers into individual branches. You can draw the branches, but I carve them freehand. Use the large super-coarse flame-shaped rUBY bit to carve the rough branch texture. Then, use the small super-coarse flame-shaped rUBY bit to add finer texture. Buff the piece with the Scotchbrite pad in a mandrel at a low speed.



TREE: ATTACHING THE TREE TO THE COTTAGE

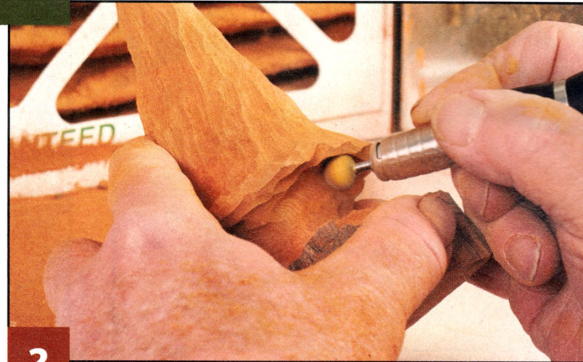


10 Prepare to attach the tree to the bark house. Cut a wedge of bark. The wedge shape allows me to control how closely I position the tree to the house. Decide which side you want the tree on. Square up the edges you plan to join on the bases of the bark house and the tree. I use a disc sander with a few blocks of plywood to lift the carving off the table to the sanding area of the disc sander. I use a belt sander to thin and flatten the bark wedge.

TREE: ROUGHING OUT THE PROJECT



1 **Taper the bark.** Mark the wood to remove and use a fine-grit ball-shaped carbide-point bit (I prefer SaburrTooth) in a rotary tool. I'm using a micro-motor, so I use a smaller bit with a 1/8" (3mm)-diameter shaft. Taper the bark up to make the pointed tree.



2 **Separate the tree from the base.** Mark the bottom of the tree and use the same ball-shaped bit to separate the bottom tree boughs from the base and trunk. Then, move up to create the top of the curling bottom boughs and separate the edges of these boughs from the rest of the tree.



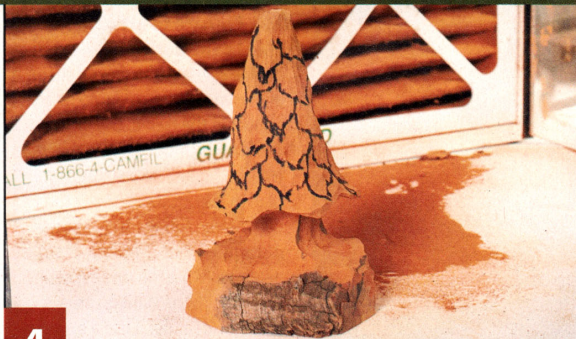
3 **Rough out the base and refine the trunk.** Mark the areas to remove, and use the ball-shaped bit to carve away the excess wood from the base and the trunk. Undercut the branches slightly and refine the upturned edge of the boughs.

TIP

WIGGLING YOUR BITS

Unlike drill bits, which are fluted to move wood dust up and away from the cutting edge, carving bits have no way to clear the dust they create. If you drill straight in with a bit, when the hole fills with dust, it will pop the bit out of the hole. To prevent this, wiggle the bit back and forth to provide some space around the bit and eject the dust.

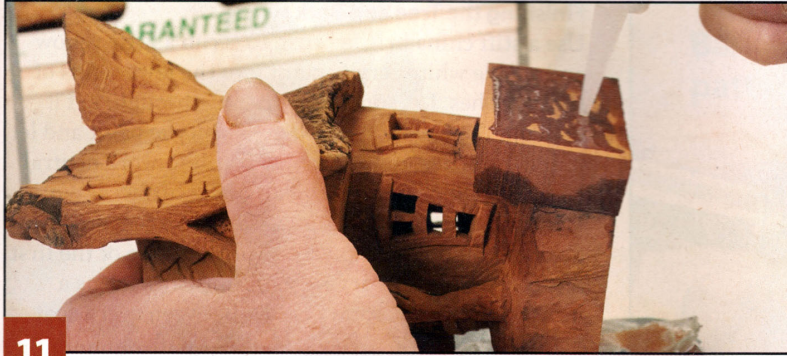
TREE: ADDING THE BRANCHES



4 **Draw the overlapping layers of branches.** Start at the top and divide the point into three branches. Then, draw the other layers, which end up looking similar to fish scales.



5 **Outline the layers of tree branches.** Use a flame-shaped super-coarse ruby bit. Carefully outline all of the layers of branches, but do not undercut them yet. Repeat the cuts several times until you reach your desired depth; I carved about 1/8" (3mm) deep.



11

Attach the tree to the bark house. Decide how close you want the tree to be to the house. Cut the excess wood away from the wedge. Apply thick cyanoacrylate (CA) glue to the side of the bark house base, apply accelerator to the wedge, and press them together; let the glue set. Apply glue to the wedge, apply accelerator to the base of the tree, and press them together; let the glue set. Use the belt sander to flatten the bottom of the assembly.

TIP

FLATTENING THE BOTTOM OF THE BASE

Use a figure-eight motion as you flatten the base. Because of the bone structure in your hands, it's almost impossible to make the base flat if you just move the pieces back and forth. The figure-eight motion allows you to flatten the base easily.



12

Refine the base. Use the ball-shaped carbide-point bit to remove the excess wood on the wedge. Then, blend the wedge in with the rest of the combined bases.

TREE: DETAILING THE BASE



13

Rough out the tree roots. Sketch the roots to get a feel for the flow. Do not try to carve on the lines. Instead, use a small fine-grit ball-shaped carbide-point bit to carve along both sides of each root. Switch to a very small ball-shaped carbide-point bit to deepen the grooves alongside and to undercut some sections of the roots. Refine the roots with a ball-nose cylinder-shaped carbide-point bit.



14

Carve one root passing under another. Switch back and forth between the very small ball-shaped carbide-point bit and the small bud-shaped super-coarse grit ruby bit as you carve a root passing under another. Carve until you can see a hole under one root and over the other.



15

Carve rocks and a stump on the base. Use a small cone-shaped carbide-point bit. Refine the stump, rocks, and roots with the small super-coarse flame-shaped ruby bit. Use a small pointed diamond bit to add texture to the roots and rocks, and to refine the undercut roots.



16 **Add bark texture to the tree trunk.** Use a small thick disc-shaped diamond bit. Make short strokes with just one edge of the disc to create wavy grooves that represent bark texture. Use a tiny knife-edge diamond wheel to add bark texture to the roots.

Finishing the Tree and Bark House

Use a stiff china bristle brush to scrub a little yellow and a little white acrylic paint into the lower ends of the branches. Let some brown show through. Let it dry, and then apply thinned green acrylic paint and let it dry. Then, use the stiff china brush to work neutral Meltonian Shoe Cream into all of the surfaces. Work it with the brush and do not leave any excess cream behind. You do not want to see any buildup of the first few coats. Buff the carving with a brush, such as a Muffer Buffer, in a rotary carver between every coat.

To antique the carving, apply a small amount of black Meltonian Shoe Cream to the highlighted areas with a small china brush, and scrub the cream in with a denture brush. This technique accents the shadows of the piece, so use it sparingly. Do not apply black polish to unfinished bark; it absorbs the black and turns an unattractive color.



A **Carve steps.** Draw the steps. Use an inverted cone-shaped carbide-point bit to reduce the thickness of each progressively lower set of steps. The inverted cone lets me create crisp, sharp distinctions between each step. Refine the steps with a fine-grit cylinder-shaped carbide-point bit. Smooth the steps with the Scotchbrite pad in a mandrel. Draw the individual stones that make up the steps, and outline each stone with the small super-coarse flame-shaped ruby bit. Make the stones uneven for a whimsical look.

Adding More Features

If you like, glue another piece of bark to the base to make room for more accessories. (Use the technique explained in Steps 10 and 11.) Then, decide what sort of details you'd like to have. I have described two that I often add to bark houses: stairs and bricks.



B **Carve some bricks.** Draw the bricks. Outline them with the small super-coarse flame-shaped ruby bit. Then, soften the edges and make the bricks uneven with the same bit. Buff the bricks with a Scotchbrite disc in a mandrel.



Bark tree pattern



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materials & tools

MATERIALS:

- Cottonwood bark
- Carved bark house
- Cyanoacrylate (CA) glue: thick consistency, thin consistency
- Cyanoacrylate (CA) glue accelerator
- Meltonian shoe cream: neutral, black
- Acrylic paint: white, green, yellow
- Ruby bits, 1/8" (3mm)-dia. shaft: super-coarse grit flame-shaped, super-coarse bud-shaped, small super-coarse flame-shaped, small super-coarse bud-shaped
- Mandrel with brown Scotchbrite 7740 pad
- Diamond bits, 1/8" (3mm)-dia. shaft: small pointed, small thick disc-shaped, tiny knife-edge wheel

TOOLS:

- Dust collector
- Rotary tool, such as a micro motor
- Carbide-point bits, 1/8" (3mm)-dia. shaft: fine-grit ball-shaped, small fine-grit ball-shaped, very small fine-grit ball-shaped, ball-nose cylinder-shaped, small cone-shaped, inverted cone-shaped, fine-grit cylinder shaped
- Denture brush
- Disc sander
- Belt sander
- Soft polishing brush, such as a Muffer Buffer
- Paintbrushes: stiff china, fine china

The author used these products for the project. Substitute your choice of brands, tools, and materials as desired.



Rick Jensen of Crookston, Minn., is a popular carver and instructor. With Jack A. Williams, he co-authored The Illustrated Guide to Carving Tree Bark, and his work was featured in Carving Found Wood by Vic Hood and Jack A. Williams. Contact Rick at 218-281-5107 or rjensen@gra.midco.net.