

Bark Pine Trees

Use cottonwood bark scraps to create whimsical pine tree magnets

By Betsy Elswit

I love to carve cottonwood bark, but in my area most cottonwood trees don't have especially thick bark. Sometimes I can get a few good-sized pieces from one of our Eastern cottonwood trees. One day I found a small, leftover piece and decided to see if I could make anything out of it. I could! As I made more small bark carvings, I tried different ideas, and one thing that I have enjoyed making is pine trees. These make great whittling projects that can be done with just one knife. I often carry a folding knife and a small piece of bark when I go out for walks, and I stop and carve things while out in the woods. These are quick and really don't need to be measured. One of the nicest things about them is that you don't have to worry about making them perfectly even. Your finished product will be better if it is lopsided, bent, and irregular. If it doesn't come out the way you wanted, throw it out and try again. And if you're using found wood, you haven't wasted any money on a mistake.

Getting Started

Most of my scraps are 3" (7.6cm) to 5" (12.7cm) long. These pieces end up 2" to 3" wide (5.1cm to 7.6cm) and 1" to 2" (2.5cm to 5.1cm) thick. I divide these pieces into thirds, and then carve two-thirds of the blank, leaving the bottom third uncarved as the base.



PREPPING AND CARVING



1

Rough out the tree. Carve off the outer bark on the top two-thirds of the blank. Carve the bark into a cone shape, but leave the back flat. If your tree ends up long and thin, add a bend to the cone to create movement and interest. The branches can reach the whole way to the ground, or you can cut away the lower ones to show the trunk.



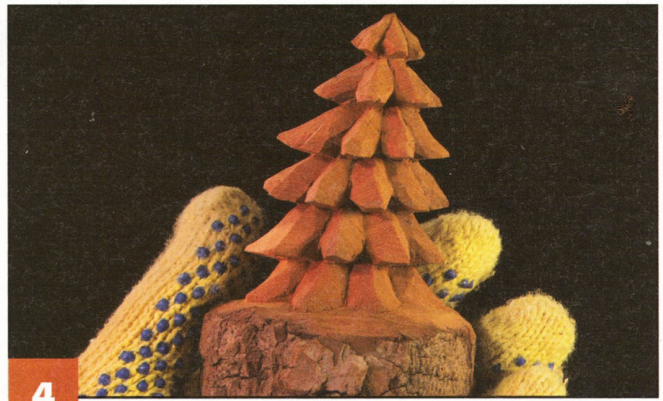
2

Rough out the boughs. Draw horizontal lines for the branches around the tree. Space the branches $\frac{1}{4}$ " to $\frac{1}{2}$ " (6mm to 1.3cm) apart (closer for a small tree and farther for a large tree). Make a stop cut on each line and taper up to the stop cut so the boughs appear to overlap.



3

Divide the boughs. Draw vertical lines to separate the boughs into branches. Stagger the lines so you don't have one vertical line that runs from the top to the bottom. Carve a deep V-shaped groove at each line, using the knife or a $\frac{3}{8}$ " (10mm) #3 gouge.



4

Refine the branches. Taper the sides of each branch down into the groove or the branch above it. Create small curves, orienting the branches either left, right, up, or down. Cut notches in the lower parts where the branches meet; this will create shadows and add interest to the piece.



5

Add the magnet. Carve a small recess on the back of the tree for the magnet. Use epoxy to attach the magnet to the recess.



6

Embellish the remaining space. Trees are nice on their own, but if you have extra space on your bark, add a building, another tree, or whatever else you can think of. If your tree is small or the bark is soft, round the branches more to make them durable.

TIP

BROKEN BRANCHES

Cottonwood bark can be soft and brittle. If a branch breaks off, carve the broken piece into a smaller branch or cut it off totally. Trees look more realistic if they are not symmetrical.



Finishing the Tree

I use Kerf's Wood Cream to finish my cottonwood bark projects. It brings out the colors in the bark, adds a nice finish, and has a neutral smell.

materials & tools

MATERIALS

- Cottonwood bark, 1" to 2" (2.5cm to 5.1cm) thick: assorted scraps
- Finish, such as Kerf's Wood Cream
- Rags or paper towels (to apply finish)
- Magnet
- Epoxy

TOOLS

- Knife with a good detail tip
- #3 gouge: $\frac{3}{8}$ " (10mm) (optional)

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



Betsy Elswit lives in Ithaca, N.Y., and started carving two decades ago when she was given a set of woodcarving tools for Christmas. She is a member of the Catatunk Valley Woodcarvers Club in Candor, N.Y., and teaches classes there.