

Tinder

by Ron Garritson and Gene Hickman

Tinder is any of the natural materials that may be easily blown into a flame from a piece of burning char, charcoal or an ember. We have tried to discuss here some of the types of tinder that may have been available to the mountain man in the Rocky Mountains. Unfortunately there is not much in the historical literature telling us what they used. The ones that are listed here are some of the ones that are available to us in our part of the Rocky Mountains of Montana. Tinder is like char and needs to be kept dry. We are interested in the experiences and uses of tinder by other folks and want to expand our preliminary list. Please let us know, on the AMM member discussion group, how you do it and/or what you like or don't like about different tinders. We'd also like to hear about what you use for tinder and char containers.

Cattail cobs/fluff – Use the dry cobs. The fluff from the cobs ignites quite well. Ron uses this to line the inside of the tinder nest. Cattail fluff was packed around a live ember to maintain a coal when traveling. The fluff is often used to hold and extend the ember from bow and drill fire making by placing it around the ember formed below the fireboard.

Cheat grass – Use the dry cheat grass. It ignites quickly. The stuff prairie fires are made of.

Cottonwood bark. Use the dry inner bark. This is the papery stuff found on the underside of heavy dead bark. It is actually the cambium layer and if shredded thin works for inner layer of your fire nest. Ron and Gene find it works best as an outer layer of tinder nest with finer materials lined inside, but it can be used alone.

Cottonwood cotton - Similar to that of the Cattail fluff.

Dogbane or Indian Hemp – You need to start with old dried stalks usually after the last frost when they are dead. Pull and break the fibers out of the stalks, pulling out and separating the fibers as you would for cordage. You can rub these fibers between your hands like juniper bark which shreds it more finely, gets rid of some of the “chunks” and “fluffs” it up.

Hemp rope or string – Probably work as a good or as a better substitute for tow. Old rope or cordage was probably a little more likely to be available than tow. A good tinder that works about the same as tow if shredded fine.

Jute String – A good tinder that many of us use. Unravel the string and fluff up the jute fibers. Jute often works a better than the tow. Have used it in place of tow for cleaning guns too. Not sure about the availability or the historic documentation for jute during our time and place in history.

Mountain or other Junipers – The outer bark which is already “fiberie or threadie” can

be pulled or scraped off. Rub it between your hands shredding fibers and “fluffing” it up. The finer it is shredded/fluffed the better it works. Will ignite easily and burns hot. Scraped off a standing tree it is usually fairly dry even in wet weather.

Old abandoned bird nests - Ready made tinder nest, just add smoldering char or a coal.

Other materials – Some of these work better than others, but tinder materials can be pine needles, wood shavings, dried grasses, and the dried inner bark of different trees like willow or alder. Much of the standing dried grass we’ve tried is not really dry or fine enough to “take-right-off” burning. The finer and drier the grass, or any of these materials, the better they work. Cheat grass is very fine and dry and makes exceptional tinder.

Plant fibers – There are many plant fibers that can be pounded or shredded from the plant to get nice thin fluffy fibers. Most of these should be done after the first frost has killed the plant and it is dry. Fibers that work are Nettle, milkweed, dogbane, yucca and others. These are all the same fibers commonly used in making cordage.

Sage Brush – Much like mountain juniper. The outside “fiberie” bark can be shredded and used in your fire nest.

Tow - Ignites well sometimes, but better as the inner layer of the tinder nest. There are differences in tow. Some has more chunks or pieces and some is shredded finer. The finer it is the easier it is to ignite. Tow seems to readily absorb moisture from the air. So if it is damp out and tow hasn’t been protected it may be more difficult to ignite. Since tow is not readily available in the mountains it is probably better save it for cleaning your gun then for fire making. Ron uses it, Gene doesn’t.

Yucca fibers – These have to be totally dry and will have to be pounded down, scraped, shredded and dried. Not usually something you can do right when you need a fire. It takes some pounding and scraping to get the fibers separated from the rest and it also takes awhile for these to dry enough for tinder. We have not really tried these yet.

White Birch – The curled outer bark is highly flammable and provides tinder even when wet. Ignites quickly if not too thick. Found in the Rocky Mountains, but scattered and not nearly as common as in the great lakes, northeast or Canadian areas.

If we find an old bird's nest, the tinder nest is already made.

Ron uses a combination of all or any of the above in his pre-prepared tinder nests. Here is what Ron does:

- Cattail and or cottonwood fluff for the inner layer.
- Next layer is dry cheat grass.
- Then tow, then an outer layer of the inner fibers of the cottonwood bark. All shaped in the form of a bird nest.