

Fungus (As Tinder)

Having spent well over 25 years practicing to master the skills of our fore fathers I have had first hand experience of the many processes that each learner will go through to finally achieve each element of natural wilderness survival.

The birch tree is probably the best source of natural tinder available, both here in the UK and abroad. In fact, it is a source of two types of tinder:

- The papery birch bark
- Tinder fungus

In this fact sheet we will look at the tinder fungus which grows on dead, dying or otherwise injured birch trees.

There are, in fact, many different types of tinder fungus that grows on birch, ash and beech trees in the UK. The true tinder fungus is *Fomes fomentarius*, but there are many others (such as *Innonotus obliquus* or *Phellinus igniarius*). However, in the UK, the most common type of tinder fungus by far is called *Daldinia Concentrica*, more commonly known as Cramp Balls or King Alfred's Cakes.

But why are they special? Tinder fungus is special because in order to catch a spark it doesn't need to be charred or carbonized in the same way that charcloth needs to be before it is used. As long as it is dry inside it will catch a spark and light easily.

BGMA Tips!

Humans have long known of the uses of the birch tinder fungus - the famous "Oetzi Iceman", who died more than 5000 years ago on an Alpine glacier in Italy and whose body was found in the melting ice in 1991, was carrying a piece of tinder fungus (in this case, fomes fomentarius) in a leather pouch. It is likely that it was in common use as a natural tinder well before this.

Finding King Alfred's Cakes and House Hoof Fungus



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As I've already mentioned, King Alfred's Cakes is a common tree fungus that grows on the trunks and branches of dead, dying or injured trees. It is also possible that you will find it on fallen or cut branches too.

King Alfred's Cakes appears on birch trees in the form of small black nodules between 3 - 6 cm in diameter (1.25 - 2.5 inches). Sometimes they are found singly but more often than not are found in clumps or bunches. Scan up and down the tree trunks as you pass by keeping an eye out for the distinctive black growths. Initially they are not easy to spot but once you have spotted one, you'll be seeing them everywhere!

Preparation

To harvest King Alfred's Cakes, grasp the fungus firmly and twist it off the tree. They are quite sturdy and should come off intact. No further preparation is needed, although if the weather has been very wet they might benefit from drying in a pocket for a few hours before use.

Uses

Here are some of the ways to make the best out of any King Alfred's Cakes you find.

Tinder

Tinder is the most obvious use of King Alfred's Cakes. The inside of this fungus is invariably dry and it takes a spark easily from a ferro rod (the trick is getting the sparks to land a surface that has been cut flat or had a bowl-shaped depression dug into it). Once it has caught, blow on it gently to encourage the coal to grow. Once going it's quite difficult to put out and it is easy to use to light larger sized kindling (dry grasses, paper or bark).

A ferro rod isn't the only way you can light a tinder fungus - you can use flint and steel, a magnifying glass (in sunlight!), transfer an ember to it from one of the fire-by-friction methods or using a match or lighter!

BGMA's Tips!

You can also use it in a device known as a fire piston. A fire piston is a tube of wood, bamboo, bone, Plexiglas (Perspex) or other strong material that can instantly create a hot coal simply using air compression generated by a quick push of a plunger (the principal is similar to that of a diesel engine).

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Coal Carrier

This exploits the fact that a glowing coal of tinder fungus smolders slowly but reliably for a long period. This means that tinder fungus can be used to keep a glowing coal going for an extended period. The trick is to knock a spark into tinder fungus lump cut in half and blow on it until it grows to be about the size of a pea. Then what you have to do is take the other half of the tinder fungus lump and place this over the top and wrap the whole thing tightly in leaves, grass (not dried or the whole thing might catch light) or a sheet of birch bark. This restricts the oxygen to the coal enough to keep it from burning too fast but lets enough in to keep it going. With practice you might be able to keep a coal going like this for many hours.

Fuel

If you happen to come across a big batch of tinder fungus you can use it as all-weather fuel. However, this method is very wasteful of this marvelous tinder and should only be used in emergencies.

BGMA Tips!

You might read in other research material that tinder fungus can be ground up and made into a caffeine-free coffee substitute. Beware! These sites are referring to a different kind of tinder fungus, called "Chagga", found on birch trees in the USA. While the tinder fungus found in the UK isn't poisonous, I wouldn't like to wake up in the morning to a brew made from it!

Conclusion

Put simply, tinder fungus (along with birch bark) is the best natural tinder about. Sure, it doesn't beat cotton wool mixed with Vaseline for getting a fire going quickly but then again, you don't find Vaseline soaked cotton wool balls growing on trees.