

How to Start a Campfire

By Jeff Adams, For ReserveAmerica.com

When you hear the word "camping," a swirl of pleasant images immediately comes to mind. But perhaps the most iconic is the welcoming campfire.

More than just to ward off the chilly night, a campfire is a place where family and friends gather to lounge and chat, roast marshmallows, or simply stare into the glowing coals and let the mind wander.

But before you can reach such nirvana, you should know how to start a campfire. And really, it's not that hard...

STEP 1: Gather Your Tools

There's a bit more to building a great campfire than simply placing a few logs in a heap and tossing on a match. Here's what you'll need:

Tinder—the smallest and easiest burning materials used to get a campfire started. Tinder can take many forms, including:

- Wood shavings
- Wadded paper
- Strips of cardboard
- Commercial fire sticks or fire starters
- Dryer lint
- Wax

Kindling—the next step up in size. Usually twigs or small branches between 1/8 inch and 1/2 inch in diameter.

Firewood—the crown of an inviting campfire. Firewood can vary anywhere from 1 inch to 5 inches in diameter. It can be whole logs, or split down from larger pieces. It's important that your firewood is completely dry in order to start easily and stay lit.

Important Note: Don't break branches off trees for firewood. If everyone did this there wouldn't be any forests left. Some forest management agencies permit you to pick up fallen limbs but ask first.

Matches or a lighter—how else are you going to get your campfire started? Common stick matches are fine, although gas lighters used for starting BBQ grills are gaining in popularity.

STEP 2: Build the Fire

Before you can start a campfire, you have to build it first.

If your site has a fire ring, you'll probably have to push the ash and charcoal from previous fires to the outer edge of the ring to give you enough room for the new fire. For ashes that are stone cold, consider shoveling them into a plastic trash bag for proper disposal later.

If you have to create your own fire pit, clear away any dead grass or vegetation for 8 to 10 feet around. You want bare dirt. Then dig down into the cleared soil several inches and set the loose dirt off to one side for use in case of emergency. You can mound the dirt around the sides of the pit to act as a firewall, or place large rocks around the edge of the pit to insulate the fire.

Next, at the center of the fire ring, lay a bed of tinder perhaps a foot in diameter. (Remember, tinder is the really light, quick burning material.)

1. **The Teepee Fire:** This style is good for cooking. First, arrange your kindling in teepee fashion over your tinder. Then build a larger teepee of firewood over the kindling. When lit, the flames will rise up through the kindling and into the larger wood.
2. **The Lean-to Fire:** This style is also good for cooking. Start by sticking a long piece of kindling into the ground above your tinder at about a 30-degree angle, with the other end of the stick pointing into the wind. Then lean smaller pieces of kindling against both sides of the longer piece to build a tent. As the kindling catches fire add more, followed by your firewood.
3. **The Cross Fire:** This is ideal for a long-lasting fire. Start by laying your kindling over the tinder bed in a crisscross fashion, followed by your logs or firewood.
4. **The Log Cabin Fire:** Another long-lasting fire. Begin by creating a kindling teepee over your tinder, then lay two logs on either side of the cone. Place two more logs on top of these to form a square. Then build up using smaller and shorter pieces of firewood until you've formed a cabin. Top off the cabin with some of your lightest kindling.

STEP 3: Light the Fire

Now it's time to enjoy the results of your labor. Remember to keep children and pets safely away, then light your tinder. For best results light the tinder from several sides. Don't squirt charcoal lighter fluid into a fire; flames could travel up the stream and burn you. And NEVER use gasoline!

Once your campfire is established, feed it with additional wood as needed, taking care not to build the flames too high. Be sure to keep your fire extinguishing tools nearby, and never leave a fire unattended, even for a moment.

Putting Out Your Fire

Once the evening is over, it's your responsibility to put your campfire out completely so give yourself plenty of time to do the job right.

Start by sprinkling—not pouring—water onto the flames or coals. Don't flood the fire ring or pit as you or the next camper will want to use it later.

As you sprinkle, stir the embers with a stick or shovel to ensure that all the coals get wet. Once the steam has subsided and you no longer hear any hissing sounds you're just about done.

Before you head off to bed or pack up to leave, place the back of your hand just above the wet ashes. Don't touch them as they could still be hot. Don't feel any heat? Then the fire is out. If it still feels warm add more water and stir until the fire bed is cold.

With the proper fire ring or pit, the right tinder, kindling and firewood, plus selecting the style of campfire that best meets your preferences, you and your family can safely enjoy an evening under the stars while making s'mores.

Don't Forget: Safety First

Safety is the most important factor when learning how to start a campfire—especially if you have kiddie campers. A 2011 study revealed that a person is injured by fire every 30 minutes, so stay alert as dancing flames have a magnetic quality that draws people close.

Right behind personal safety is the environment. The Earth's climate change is leaving our forests and

grasslands parched—to the point where one errant spark can set off a raging wildfire. So before you even think about how to start a campfire, consider these important points:

Are campfires allowed in the area? Look for posted signs. Or ask a ranger or camp host. Just because a campsite has a fire ring doesn't automatically mean fires are permitted.

Is the site properly prepared? Be sure there's at least 8 to 10 feet of bare dirt surrounding the fire ring. Take the time to clear away any flammable debris that can catch fire. And make sure there are no tree branches overhanging the area; they can catch fire more easily than you think.

How about weather conditions? Take heed of building clouds and rising winds. An approaching storm can easily fan the smallest campfire out of control. If there's even the slightest doubt, wait for safer conditions.

Do you have fire safety equipment? Always make sure there's a shovel nearby, along with a few gallons of water. While water is preferred, a liberal application of loose dirt can keep things under control. Just be aware that coals can stay dangerously hot beneath a blanket of soil many hours after you've put the fire out.

TYPE OF WOOD	LOG	DESCRIPTION OF WOOD
Oak		- Very dense - Hot-burning - Should season at least one year
Maple		- Difficult to split - Efficient, hot-burning - Should season at least one year
Cherry		- Burns at medium heat - Sweet burning aroma - Sparks a lot, doesn't produce lots of smoke
Birch		- Burns very quickly - Bright, hot-burning - Good firestarter
Pine		- High sap content - Burns messy - Don't use as your exclusive firewood
Elm		- Very dense, hard wood - Difficult to split - Doesn't smell great as it burns
Chestnut		- Burns and splits easily - Burns at a low heat - Sparks a lot, heavy smoke

HOW TO BUILD A CAMPFIRE

GATHER tinder, kindling and fuel together in the sizes and quantities shown *before any matches are struck*. Sizes and quantities are just a 'rule of thumb' - get close to the descriptions and you'll do fine. Don't make any of it too short or too big around.

BUILD the fire by adding kindling wood to the burning tinder and then adding fuel to the fire as it grows.. No need for a fancy fire lay, build it as you go.



Tinder from *dead* twigs found on the lower branches of trees and shrubs that snaps off easily when bent. No green wood!

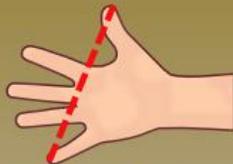
Kindling should be dry, don't gather wet wood from the forest floor. Look for branches that are dead and down, not on the tree.

Fuel should be dry, split larger wood if possible and have a good sized stack on hand before you light the fire.

TINDER



Around the size of a pencil lead.



No shorter than your outstretched hand



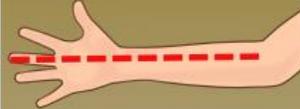
Enough to fill a circle made with your hands



KINDLING



No thicker than your thumb.



About as long as your elbow to your fingertips



Enough for a generous armload



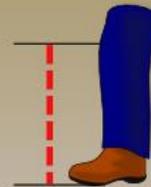
FUEL



About as thick as your wrist



About as long as your arm



A stack about as high as your knee



1 Bend the tinder in half and light the center.

2 Add kindling, keep piling it on loosely, give the fire plenty of kindling to keep growing.

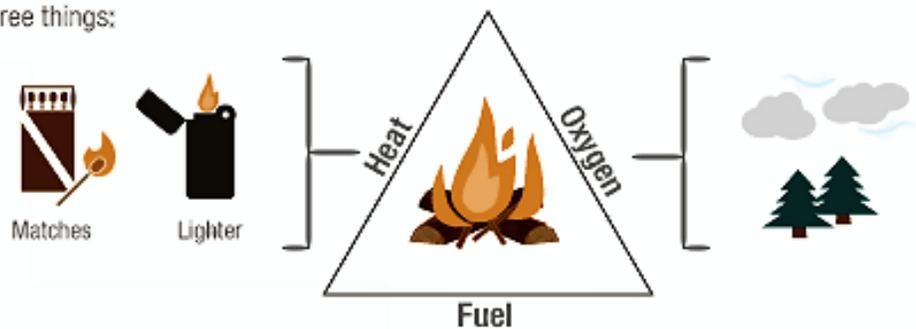
3 As the kindling begins to burn begin adding fuel.

ScoutmasterCG.com - Camping skills and outdoorsmanship
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THE FIRE TRIANGLE

Fires need these three things:



1 TINDER



Dry leaves



Pine needles



Paper



Lint or cotton balls

2 KINDLING



Twigs, sticks, small branches

3 CHOPPED WOOD

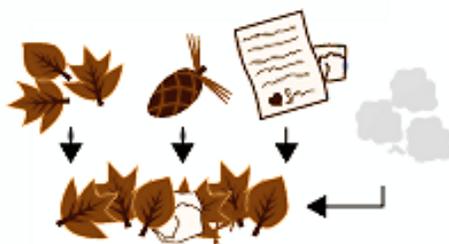


Firewood
(thicker than 3 inches)

STEP ONE

Make a loose pile of tinder. **1**

TIP: Don't pack too tightly. Air needs to get to all parts of the fire.



STEP TWO

Build a tepee with the kindling **2** around the tinder. Start with the small twigs first.



STEP THREE

Light the tinder from all sides.

TIP: You can blow gently on the fire to get it going. Fires need lots of oxygen.



STEP FOUR

As the fire grows, feed it with branches and eventually firewood. **3**

Enjoy!



STEP FIVE

Put out the fire by cutting one of the sides of the fire triangle. You can do this by covering it with sand or dirt, dousing it with water or letting wood burn out.

Make sure it's cold before you leave!



Sand or dirt



Water



Let wood burn out