

MATERIALS FOR FLINT AND STEEL FIRESTARTING

Fire steels, strikers, fire strikers and strike-a-lights are all names given to the tool we use to make our fires. Whatever the name, there are several key components to the process. Here is information on steels, flint, tinder, char cloth, char containers and storage.

You can make fire steels from any steel but one with high carbon content will work best. Old files are well suited to the process. If you choose to make one from lower carbon steel, you will need to case harden it. You can find information on that process on the web or you can e-mail me with questions. Several of the sites listed here sell fire steels.

There are many types of flint and everyone seems to have their favorite. If you're able to pick it out yourself, choose a piece with some long, straight somewhat sharp edges. Not too sharp or you will just shred it when you hit it with your steel. This piece will be easier to strike and spark. Several of the sites listed here sell flint.

Tinder is a topic that seems to generate fierce loyalties. Simple jute rope works for me. It is a highly combustible, natural fiber and is inexpensive and readily available. I use small sections of 1/4" rope. 2 inches or so of this rope is plenty for a tinder bundle. To make this tinder bundle, cut off a small section of rope (2-3") and unwind and shred the rope down to its constituent fibers that are about the same size as thick thread. Ball this up loosely into something that resembles an egg sized bird's nest and make a slight indentation in the center. Your char cloth will go into this indentation.

Char cloth is the weakest link for this process when discussed from a medieval point of view. Char cloth is perfect for making fires but I know of no historical evidence for its use before 1600. I learned these techniques as a Boy Scout and from F&I and Rev War re-enactors. Did medieval man know about char cloth? Likely. Can one make char cloth with tools and processes known prior to 1600? Maybe, but I haven't tried. I received a suggestion here and there but I have no specific information and mention it here because I don't want you to walk away from this session thinking that I'm sure Shakespeare lit his fires this way.

To make char cloth, you will need a small metal container with a small hole in it. Some of the vendors listed here sell such containers (think Altoid or shoe polish cans). Punch a small hole through both halves of your can. This hole will allow the gas to escape and you can rotate the lid to close the hole and use the can for storage of your supplies. Make your char cloth from a natural fiber fabric. Linen and cotton are the obvious choices. Lighter is better because though heavier fabric makes char cloth that is easier to handle, it is also harder to light.

Place several 1" square scraps of fabric into your container. How many depends on the size of your container. Too many will make it difficult to burn them successfully. Too few will burn up. Experiment. Heat the closed container with the holes lined up in the open position. You can do this on a stove since it won't take too long, although it's a little smoky. When the cloth begins to burn, a small flame and some smoke will come out of the hole. Wait until just after this flame ceases and turn off the heat. Walk away and open your tin much later. If you open it too soon, it can ignite again and you'll have a lovely tin of ashes. It should be black and you should be able to handle it. If it falls apart at the slightest touch, you cooked it too long, try again. You will place this material into the tinder bundle.

This tin is not an appropriate tool for Europe before 1600. It works for me and makes a handy container to carry all your bits in. Use what works for you. The last piece of advice I have is to

add a small section of candle to your kit. If something goes wrong with your tinder bundle or your artfully laid out kindling pile, a candle will save you lots of effort. Light the candle with your flaming tinder bundle and if you need more flame, you'll have it right there and it won't be cheating with a Zippo.

MECHANICS OF FLINT AND STEEL FIRESTARTING

To start a fire with flint and steel, you will need flint, steel, char cloth, tinder and a pre-laid fire. Building a fire and fire safety is beyond the scope of this effort but be sure to have all the material needed laid out and set up safely before you make your spark. The spark and tinder will make a nice match but will not last forever. Like the preparation that goes into painting a room, the action of sparking doesn't take nearly as long as preparing your fire bed.

To make a spark with flint and steel, strike the flint with your striker on a sharp edge away from your body (and eyes). You're only trying to nick the steel, not cleave the flint in half. It will be safer but impractical to wear safety glasses so wear them while you practice at home and get a feel for how the flint and steel will work together. The creation of the spark is the ignition of small pieces of steel sheared away by the flint. That's why you strike the steel at the flint. I hold the flint in my off hand and the steel in my strong hand. It works for me and might not for you – experiment.

Make a small bundle of tinder (see above) and place your char cloth in that and strike the flint toward this bundle so that when a spark catches in the char cloth, you have the bundle there and are ready to fire your tinder and light your fire. Do this by cupping the flint, tinder and char in your off hand and using your striker with your strong hand. The goal is to get a spark caught in the char cloth that burns reliably and slowly. Once you spark the char cloth in the tinder bundle, blow slowly and steadily at the char cloth towards the tinder. Once the tinder lights, it will burn much faster and hotter. This small bunch of burning tinder is your match. You will place this fire into your carefully arranged choice of kindling.

That's it. It is very simple to explain and more difficult to do. Each of the individual components affects the outcome. Bad steel in the striker, poor quality flint, heavy char or wet tinder can all affect how easily you can light your fire. Like everything else, practice makes perfect.

WEB RESOURCES (in no particular order)

<http://www.wolfeargent.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi> (Firestryker forum)

<http://members.aye.net/~bspen/fire.html>

http://www.hollowtop.com/hopsstore_html/bowdrill.htm

<http://www.ragweedforge.com/cat-misc.html#strikers>

http://www.hollowtop.com/spt_html/spt.html

<http://www.ragweedforge.com/striking.html>

<http://lynx.dac.neu.edu/m/mbennett/spark.html>

<http://www.nativewayonline.com/>

<http://www.smoke-fire.com/>

<http://www.jastown.com/fire/fire.htm>

<http://www.pantherprimitives.com/index.html>

<http://www.armlann.com> (my site)

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