

Tips & Tricks for the Tee Pee Fire Lay 10 Steps to a "One Match" Fire

By Tom Laskowski

We all can agree that fire is a key element in wilderness survival but what we may disagree on is the "best" way to start it. Over the years, I have tried most every fire lay, from pyramids to log cabins to a simple pile of small sticks thrown onto the ground. Each works to some degree, especially if the wood and air are bone dry. However, in more realistic conditions when you have unseasoned wood and high humidity in the air, I've found that the Tee Pee fire lay is the most reliable configuration, especially if you know a few tricks to "stack the deck" in your favor. The more things you do to "stack the deck", the higher the chances you will "win" (get a fire).

Fire Volume #1, Midwest Native Skills Institute's (MNSI) highly acclaimed video on primitive fire making, provides detailed instruction on making fire with flint & steel, the bow drill, and the hand drill. But because all fire-starting methods require growing your tiny initial flame into a larger, self-sustaining fire, we start the video with a section on "one match fires." We cover a host of tips and tricks that virtually guarantee that you WILL get a fire started if you meticulously follow each step and use each trick. I will be sharing some of those tricks with you in this article. On a dry summer day, with dry wood and no pressing need to get a fire started, you can skip many of these tips and still get a blaze going. However, keep in mind that you are decreasing your chances of getting the fire started with each step you decide to skip or short cut. On a dreary day, when all the wood you can find is wet



and you're within hours of going into hypothermia, I would strongly suggest you take the time and use each tip and trick to ensure that your fire (and you!) will survive.

Tips and Tricks

1. When talking about fire lays... size matters. Too small of a structure and there won't be enough burning kindling to build your fire up; too large and you'll need massive amounts of tinder to fill it or, more likely, it will "burn hollow" and go out. I found the ideal size to be as tall as your hand. Simply place your fingertips on the ground and



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extend your thumb straight out. The height of your thumb above the ground is about the height your Tee Pee fire structure should be.

2. Collect the driest wood possible. Damp wood doesn't burn easily because the moisture keeps temperatures from rising high enough. The best source of dry wood is dead trees that are still standing (called "standing dead wood"). Since the standing dead wood is vertical (standing), the capillaries in the wood are also vertical, allowing gravity to pull moisture in the wood down to the ground relatively fast, leaving you with dry wood that hasn't had time to rot. Your next best source is "snags" or branches that have broken off of a tree but were tangled up in other branches and still suspended off the ground. Snags can air dry without absorbing ground moisture or rotting.

As a last resort you can use wood off the ground, but remember: the ground holds moisture that is transferred to the wood lying on it. If you do use wood collected off the ground, at least try to avoid pieces that have mosses or fungi growing on them. It's also a good idea to strip off the damper bark and even shave off the moister, outer wood to expose the drier, inner wood. Get the driest wood possible.

Three tests for dryness that I use are:

- Any stick that is green in color is still alive. Live wood is probably about 70% water, and water doesn't burn.
- If a stick breaks with a "snap", then it's fairly dry. If it only cracks, or bends and then breaks, it is too damp.
- In the summer, you can hold the wood against



your cheek. If it feels warm against your skin after a second or so, then it's fairly dry. If it still feels cool, it's too damp.

3. Get three straight sticks about the diameter of your pinky finger that will serve as the framework for your Tee Pee fire. At least two of these sticks should have a "Y" at the top so that you can use the "Y". It's to lock the framework together.

Using your knife, carve all 3 of these sticks into "fuzz sticks" by shaving into the wood just under the bark and then lifting up the wood sliver (which remains attached). Push these sticks into the ground to form a "tee pee" and interlock their tops to stabilize the structure. You want the structure to be tall and skinny (not short and fat).

4. Determine which way the wind is blowing and choose the side of the Tee Pee structure facing



into the wind to have the opening. This not only allows any wind to help your fire along by blowing the flames into the structure when it is lit, it also pushes the smoke away from your face if you need to blow into the fire lay (through the opening) to help it along.

5. Make a platform inside the structure. You can use small sticks or a piece of bark for this. The platform will keep the tinder you later put into the structure off the ground (and away from the ground's



moisture), plus the platform will raise the tinder up to allow air under it and create a "chimney effect" in your fire lay.

6. ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT: Collect thin, straight sticks (kindling) that are as long as your three support sticks from step #3. These kindling sticks should be the diameter of a toothpick. If they will not fit between your teeth (as a toothpick will), they are too big in diameter. This first layer of kindling has to be very thin to ensure that the sticks catch and burn on their own in the few seconds before your tinder burns out. Collect enough of these thin sticks to completely make one full, tight layer around the



structure. Typically, this will take about 50 sticks (10 are too few and 100 are too many).

7. Collect a second layer of kindling sticks that are slightly larger in diameter than the first layer (*see photo comparison of level 1, 2 and 3 stick sizes*). The concept here is to have the first layer ignite the

second layer in less than 20 seconds. If your second layer sticks are significantly larger than those in the first layer, they won't catch before the first layer burns up, breaking the progression, and your fire will go out. Arrange this second layer of sticks evenly around the structure over the first layer. It will take about 30 sticks to complete this layer

8. Collect a third layer of kindling sticks that is slightly thicker than those in your 2nd layer and arrange them evenly



around the structure. This layer should take about 20 sticks.

9. Collect additional wood that you will use after lighting your Tee Pee fire lay to build up your fire into a campfire. Use the concept of gradually increasing the diameter: this wood should include pieces that are slightly thicker than those in your 3rd layer, all the way up to pieces that are the thickest that you intend to burn. The thickest pieces will determine how big your campfire will be and how long it will burn unattended. A small, quick fire may not need sticks any thicker than your

finger, while an evening cooking fire may use sticks as thick as your wrist or upper arm.

10. The last construction step is to fill the inside to the Tee Pee structure with easily ignitable tinder. Tinder is any fine, fluffy material that will ignite easily using a spark (from a Ferro cerium rod) or flame (from a lighter, flint & steel or other primitive technique such as those demonstrated in **Fire Volume #2 - 40 + Ways to Make Fire without Matches**).

The best natural tinder is a mixture of several fluffy materials such as shredded inner bark from a cedar, shredded dry grasses, small bits of cattail down, dandelion clocks, dogbane or milkweed seed fluff, shaved bark from a tulip poplar, pine needles that have been crushed or finely shredded, and fine slivers of white birch bark.

Ideally, you want enough tinder to completely fill the interior of your fire lay. However, don't pack it too tight because you want to keep the tinder fluffy and airy so that it burns well.

Now, I know the tag line of this article is "**10 Steps to a**

(Continued on page 88)

