

Teach your kids the fun, safe way to split kindling

By Don Fallick

Bang! Bang! I raised my groggy head from the pillow. ‘What’s going on?’ Then I remembered: eight-year old Mandy had volunteered to light the fire this morning. ‘Hey! She doesn’t know how to use an axe!’ Thud/Clang! ‘Daddy!!! I hit my knee with the axe!’ Two hours and several stitches later, after setting a new land speed record on the way to the hospital in town, I vowed to teach all my kids to split kindling safely—even the youngest. You just never know when they might need the knowledge.

Granny’s way

I learned to make kindling from an old homestead granny who’s been splitting her own for 60 years and still has all her fingers and toes. She uses an old, double-bit axe, but instead of holding the wood and swinging the axe at it, she sticks the axe in a stump and drives the wood down on it with a club. This wouldn’t work well with hardwood or wet wood, but it works fine with bone-dry pine, fir, or cedar, which is what you want for kindling, anyway. I like to start with a piece of super dry wood, split into quarters with an axe or maul. Hold the wood vertically, so one end is resting lightly on the upward-pointing blade of the axe and strike down on the other end.

Make a club

You could use a hammer or a mallet, but you chance damaging the axe or cutting the mallet. It’s easy to make a club out of a small piece of firewood that will last for years if kept out of the rain. Just thin the end of a 3-inch diameter stick with a hatchet, then shape a handle by whittling with a Scout knife. The whole club should be about 18 inches long. Adjust the length and handle size to suit the strength and hand-size of the user. We



keep several clubs of various sizes in the woodshed. Allow 2 or 3 inches for the club to taper down to the handle thickness. If you don’t taper it, the handle will break when you strike the wood. Besides, it’s easier to make that way.

Good kindling

The best kindling comes from old cedar telephone poles. Every year when I’m getting in the firewood I go by the electric company and ask if they have any useless old poles for sale for kindling. I’ve never had to pay for one yet. Sometimes, they even cut them to stove length for me. **Don’t burn** the creosoted ends! It fouls the air, and it’s a waste, as they can be split into excellent fence posts. The rest of the pole can be cut into billets of very fast-burning wood that splits easily into pieces as thin as you want. If you try to split thin slices off a thick

piece, the thin slice will “run out” to a long, tapered splinter, because the thin part flexes more than the thick part. The trick to split each piece approximately half. Old cedar poles split so well that you can easily get them down to matchstick size if you want.

Safety tricks

When the pieces get really thin, it’s best to lay them horizontally on the axe bit and strike lightly with the club. If you have stuck the axe firmly in the stump, you can pop the pieces off by starting them with the club, then pulling the end of the wood to one side. Kids love watching the split run down the length of the wood, and hearing the **sproing!** as the piece flies off. That’s the best thing about splitting kindling this way -your kids will beg to do it for you! Δ