

MAKING STICKS AND STAFFS

Described here is the preparation of wood gathered from woodland and hedgerows for making wands, drumbeater handles, simple walking sticks and staffs. There's no need to closely follow the sizes given; they are there for guidance only.

Suitable wood can be found amongst fresh agricultural hedge trimmings and where trees have been thinned in woodland, usually during late Autumn and Winter. From the end of November to mid February is the best time to cut and gather fresh wood, as the sap is down. This will speed up the drying (seasoning) time of the wood, and it will be less prone to splitting at the ends.

Wood can be taken from live trees, but this is best given some thought. Time can be taken to find a piece that seems attractive or suitable, where on "asking" the tree it feels comfortable to take the wood. Cut the wood cleanly and respectfully with loppers, or a pruning saw if the wood is a larger size, then give thanks for the wood. Then, say, a walking stick which may be a companion for many miles will truly be a gift from Nature. The wood needs to be cut about 80mm longer than needed so any splits at the ends during drying can be removed. For walking sticks an extra 200mm or so is needed to allow for final adjustment in length for the user when the wood has dried. When looking for wood of a particular diameter, remember to allow 2 to 4mm over size for the bark if the wood is to be debarked (have the bark removed).

Drumbeater handles (where a padded end is fitted to one end for striking the drum) are typically 300 to 380mm long and 10 to 13mm thick. The held end can be carved to provide a good grip. Ash is tough and good for drumbeater handles. Wands vary greatly in size but tend to be longer and up to 20mm in diameter. Sticks this size need about 10 weeks to dry, or around 8 weeks if the wood is debarked.

For straight walking sticks, the wood can be some 20 to 25mm diameter; the length to roughly suit the user's height plus about 200mm extra. For a thumbstick with a fork in the top, the fork is at about elbow height. Allow about 16 weeks to dry, or 14 weeks if the wood has been debarked. Very rarely, a stick with a natural handle can be found, giving the traditional walking stick shape. Rubber sockets which fit over the ground end of a walking stick which give the stick protection are available.

Staffs are typically around shoulder to head height and 30 to 40mm in diameter. Allow about 28 weeks to dry, or 24 weeks if the wood has been debarked. Hazel is a favourite for walking sticks and staffs as it can grow really straight rods.

The wood needs to be dried in a cool room out of the Sun, and can be brought into a warmer place for the last two or so weeks of drying. If the bark is to be left on the wood, it can be soaked for an hour or so and scrubbed with lukewarm water to which some washing up liquid has been added to clean it up. This can reveal beautiful bark in what seemed to be an unattractive looking piece of wood. If the wood is to be debarked, doing so within a week or so from fresh will ensure its easy removal, as dried bark is difficult to remove. With dry bark the wood will need to be soaked for a few days to make the bark easy to remove without gouging the wood itself. The bark can be carefully peeled off in strips with a knife and the remainder scraped off. Carving and decorating wooden items is a pleasant occupation and there's much scope for creativity. Two or three coats of Danish wood oil can be applied to the wood if required for protection against moisture and to give a finish.