

In Search of the Perfect Tree Cookie*

By: Joe MacKenzie

Where do you get a good tree cookie when you need one? You have the recipe down for chocolate chip cookies. Your neighborhood girl scout can satisfy your craving for thin mints. But when it comes to whipping up a batch of high fiber, multi-ringed tree cookies, most of us are not sure where to turn. The purpose of this article is to tell you how to make your own tree cookies like a pro; tree cookies that not only look good but will also hold-up in a classroom for years.

"Tree Cookies," Activity 76 in the preK-8 PLT Activity Guide has always been a favorite at workshops. It was not long before requests for cookies were rolling in from educators. I did little more than find a tree, a saw, and had at it. Ten minutes of work produced what I thought was the finished product — a cardboard box of rough-cut tree slices. Were they pretty? No. Could you count the rings? Sort of, if you looked close.

Through the affects of time, space, and moisture, the box of tree cookies had been transformed into a box of fungus fragments. After a moment of thoughtful reflection, I recalled that yes, woods is not only renewable and recyclable but also biodegradable. Since then, time, trial, and humility have led to a much improved recipe for tree cookies. Following, are the five main steps for making tree cookies.

Tree Selection

Pine trees are my favorite for tree cookies. The annual rings are easily distinguished, the wood is soft and easy to cut and sand, and the supply is usually plentiful. The trees to cut need to be about the diameter of an aluminum soda can at the base of the tree and between two to four inches in diameter. To keep your tree cookies from all looking the same, look for trees with a variety of growth patterns growing on varied sites — suppressed trees growing slowly as well as rapidly growing trees.

Tree Harvesting

Once selected I use a large tooth pruning saw (available at hardware stores) to cut the tree at the base and trim off the branches. Then cut the main tree stem into segments three or four feet in length (up to about a two inch top) and transport them back to work on. A vital step in the tree cookie recipe is to dry the wood. If you have access to a lumber kiln at a Chip-n-Saw mill, this is a good time to do it. Just ask the yard supervisor to stick the tree cookie poles in with the lumber being dried. After three or four days in the kiln the poles should be sufficiently dry and much lighter. If you don't have access to such a kiln, just go to the slicing step and worry about drying later.

Tree Cookie Slicing

The next step is to take the poles and slice them into cookies. This means sawing the wood into cookie segments between 1-2 inches thick. This is best accomplished by a motor driven saw such as a radial arm saw. However, the same pruning saw that was suggested to harvest the tree may be used to slice as well. Whatever method used, always remember SAFETY FIRST!

Tree Cookie Drying

If the wood was not dried in a kiln as previously described it is necessary to let the wood dry now. This may be done by storing the cut cookies in a dry, well ventilated surface under low humidity for three to ten days. Take care to turn them over periodically to allow both sides to dry. Placing them on a driveway on a sunny day also works well. If you need faster results, it is possible to very carefully and slowly dry them in an oven set on "warm." This should be done under close monitoring and supervision. Place the cookies on a cookie sheet (of course) or foil and allow to slowly dry for three to five hours, turning cookies over occasionally.

Tree Cookie Sanding

Sanding a cookie that has been properly dried, may be done by hand or with a mechanical table mounted belt sander. The initial sanding should be done with course paper and then a second one with medium paper. Place the sandpaper on a flat surface and sand your cookies until you can count the annual rings easily. Suggestions: this is a dusty job; if possible do it outside under the shade of a tree.

Tree Cookie Finishing

Now your tree cookies need some kind of finish coating to stand up to the rigors of life in the classroom. You may want to keep some cookies uncoated in order to allow students to smell the wood. For those that are going to be coated, use clear polyurethane. The polyurethane may be brushed, dipped, or sprayed, and the more the better.

Good Luck!

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