

Using Charcloth

By Steve Dykeman

Be safe
Have fun
Better yourself



Charcloth is a slow-burning fuel with a low ignition temperature. It can be ignited with a spark or concentrated sunlight, and then used to ignite a tinder bundle to start a fire.

It is not considered to be a tinder by itself, since it will not ignite kindling, but can be a valuable aid to help ignite tinder.

Charcloth is made by heating cotton cloth in the absence of oxygen (known as pyrolysis). See the article "[Making Charcloth](#)"

By searching the web, charcloth can be purchased, however, it is best that you know how to make it yourself.

I have purchased charcloth from many sources in order to find what other people out there are doing. All of it has worked, but some better than others. Good charcloth should light easily from focused sunlight or a spark. There are also people out there that say steel wool is a good substitute for charcloth. This is ridiculous. Steel wool cannot light from the sun. You cannot make steel wool yourself. Charcloth on the other hand can be made at home or in the bush. What can be a good substitute is most any charred material, including, wood, cotton string or rope, cattail fluff, tree fungus, or punk wood. You can often find charred wood on the ground from a fire that burned through the area at some time during the last few hundred years.



Properly made charcloth will easily catch with a spark. A shower of sparks from a ferro rod should ignite the cloth in many places as seen in the picture.

A good way to go is to purchase a small tin of ready-made char cloth and refill it with your own charcloth as you use up the purchased cloth. This way you can see how the char cloth works before attempting to make your own. This also provides a very convenient storage container for your cloth. A container of char cloth as shown, can be purchased on the web site. www.tb-gear.com



Using Charcloth with the sun

Using charcloth with the sun is the most preferred fire making method. The reason for this is that the sun won't burn out in your lifetime, and the Fresnel lens will also last your life. If the sun is out, then the Fresnel lens is your first choice. Char cloth is the easiest way to use the Fresnel lens.



I recommend putting your piece of charcloth inside your tinder bundle (bird nest) to start. This way you don't need to move it there once it has been lit by the sun. The sun will easily light your charcloth with a Fresnel lens or other magnifying device. A Fresnel lens is good to have in your kit since it is very inexpensive and can easily fit almost anywhere.

The Fresnel lens has plenty of magnification to light the charcloth. You can purchase one separately from the web site or get one in the "Ferro Fire Kit" www.tb-gear.com

You can hold your tinder bundle in one hand and the Fresnel lens in the other. Adjust your position so you can have the Fresnel lens between the sun and the tinder bundle. Move the lens back and forth until you can see the sun light on the tinder bundle. Next tilt the Fresnel lens until the shape of the light is a circle. Then move the lens forward and back until you find where the circle is smallest. You may need to make finer adjustments to the angle and distance to get the sun focused to the smallest point.



When you see the charcloth smoking, it is lit. I often move the lens slightly to get the cloth lit in a second place. This way the char cloth will provide more heat to light your tinder bundle. With practice you will find the sun to be an easy method for fire making.

Once lit; cup your charcloth in the tinder bundle and blow hard. It is highly recommended to blow upward into the nest so the smoke does not choke you. Once ignited, place the flaming nest under your kindling; and that's all there is to it. Don't be fooled into thinking it doesn't require practice. Your life may depend on how well you practice.



Using Charcloth with the ferro rod

Charcloth cannot light kindling on its own, but it can help light tinder that may be difficult to light directly from a spark. Good charcloth will light easily from a shower of sparks created by the ferro rod. Once the charcloth is lit, add it to your tinder bundle and blow it into flame as was shown in the



Scrape a ferro rod to shower the cloth in sparks

previous section. Although many tinders can light from a nice shower of sparks directly, the use of charcloth can make the task much easier. With charcloth being so light weight and easy to make it is regarded as a key survival item in many kits.

The “Ferro rod” as called here for short, is a man-made metallic material called Ferrocerium. It will give off a large number of hot sparks when scraped against a rough surface such as ridged steel. See the article on [Ferro rod](#) for more complete details.

Char cloth has been a common part of man's “Tinder box” for more than a thousand years. Many used a tree fungus such as Amadou, horse hoof, or cracked cap polypore instead of the char cloth to catch a spark, but in my opinion char cloth is a better choice. This is only because it is easier to catch a spark since it can be easily folded and placed in a way to provide a nice large surface. The use of tree fungus is an important skill to learn however, since it may be a good alternative in case you have no charcloth.



A piece of steel struck with a sharp flint will produce a spark

Conclusion

Since charcloth is so light weight, easy to make, and extremely easy to ignite, it is a must have in your fire making kit. Buy some charcloth, and then make some of your own. Practice using it with a spark, and with the sun. It is quick to learn, and is fun to use.



About the author:

Steve Dykeman is an experienced outdoorsman and survivalist. He has written many articles and produced many videos on subjects relating to outdoors and survival. He has been a course director and instructor to both youth and adults. He has also been a technical consultant to manufacturing companies relating to outdoor gear. He has over 40 years of experience working with space and defense related electronics. He brings his advanced technical abilities to the outdoors, exposing the many myths and fallacies.

In recent days he is educating people to survive into our uncertain future.

