

## **Clothes Hanger: A Perfect Project for Little Bushcrafters**



Too often I have been in camps where everyone had a meaningful project to do except for one “small” segment of the camp population – the 7 – 9 year-olds. Often their older comrades are carving and building while the little guys have been asked to watch or they have been given a task that they know is busy work. This project is a wonderful hands-on, tool-centered, bushwacking activity that this age group seems to love.

The making of a simple clothes hanger may seem mundane to some, but when presented with this project, kids of that age often respond with, “I really want to make one,” or “My mom would love to have one of those.” With proper supervision, this is a safe project that allows the child to do 95% of the hands-on work and take home a tangible product that they feel is unique and useful.

This comes straight from the pages of Ellsworth Jaeger’s 1945 book, *Wildwood Wisdom*. Although this book was out of print for many years, it is once again available in reprint paperback. It usually sells for about \$10. It is full of simple and intermediate projects using supplies found in nature.

Tools needed are simple. You will need a folding saw, a small carving knife, a drill of some sort with  $\frac{1}{2}$ ” –  $\frac{5}{8}$ ” bit, and a pattern for the youngest to use when looking for the right sticks. A note on saws – folding saws usually come in two tooth patterns. One has very long sharp teeth and is designed for green wood, and the other has shorter teeth and is designed for dry wood and all around use. The green wood tooth pattern can cause some pretty nasty cuts, making the smaller, dry wood tooth pattern preferable for the youngest crafters. The saws with the smaller teeth are a little slower, but work fine in green wood, are quite safe, and give the short users a situation that allows less direct supervision and more independence. For some of these kids, this is the first time they have ever been trusted with a tool, and they absolutely love using these saws. The verbal expressions you will hear as the saw makes the final stroke through a piece of limb is plenty of proof that this bit of independence is truly important,

Another item that may need explanation is the pattern. This is simply a piece of wood that shows the child the range of shapes that a stick can be for their project. They can hold the pattern directly behind the stick before they cut. Tell them that the stick must fit within that pattern. The youngest kids in this group are still learning shapes in school, and if asked to look at a finished project and then from memory go cut sticks that will work, they often have to make a second and third try. The pattern saves time and frustration. A pattern should be supplied to each one going off to look for the proper sticks.



Tools for this project are simple: folding saw, small carving knife, drill and a wooden pattern.

Just about any kind of wood will do. We have so far used alder, birch, willow and mountain ash. The hanger will not have to hold a lot of weight so any green wood with the right shape is good. If some of these young crafters have had experience with a knife, they can cut a stick that is a bit too large and carve it down to shape. Those with no experience can simply look for sticks that work in their original shape as the one in the first photo above.

Step 1: Go find the sticks. Kids love to search for things. I have been amazed at the length of their attention spans in searching for the right sticks – proof enough that this is a worthwhile activity in this era of drag-and-click immediate satisfaction.

Step 2: Guiding your students with safe knife practice, have them cut off the bark. The ease and quickness of this process (in the spring and summer of course) also makes this a satisfying process for these crafters. Some may need help getting the bark out of the crotch of the hook piece. The instructor can do this quickly with the tip of a knife to maximize the time the project stays in student hands.

Step 3: Cut the long piece to the correct length. Someone should hold the stick while the crafter does the sawing. Most commercial wooden hangers are about 17" measured along the curve.

Step 4: Find the center of the stick and have the student drill the hole. The auger is another tool they love using. As the instructor you should hold the piece being drilled and make certain that the hole has the best up-and-down alignment possible.

Step 5: Another step where the youngest might need a little help, and all will need close supervision, is the fitting of the two pieces. Carve the shaft of the hook to where it fits snugly in the hole. Put a little wood glue in the hole before assembling. If the piece is a little loose in the hole, a peg can be put through the side of the long piece and into the shaft of the hook. The peg hole can be drilled with a small bit, 3/16" or so, or with a gimlet or even with the tip of a knife. It doesn't take much of a peg to secure the two pieces. Use a little wood glue.

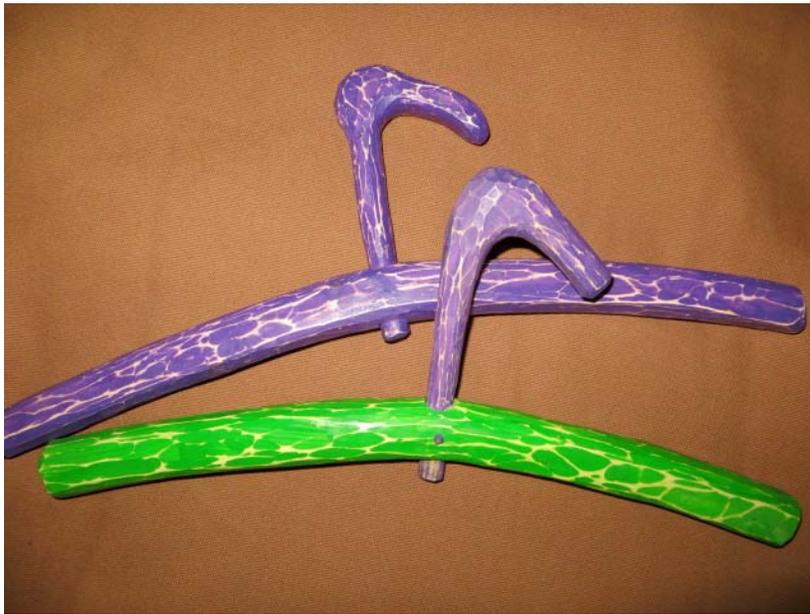
Step 6: With the carving knife, trim off all splinters, all saw marks and any inner bark that may be left.

Step 7: Take time to celebrate the completion of a job well done.



An optional step is to add color. To add color, the wood must be fairly dry. Paint added to green / wet wood can result in peeling paint or a blotchy surface. The wood should dry

several days in a warm place – in the sun or in a heated building, but not close to a heat source because that may cause the wood to crack. Use acrylic paint in playful colors. (Unlike most adults, kids are not afraid of color.) Thin the paint enough that it soaks in the wood a little. Once the paint has thoroughly dried, another option is to coat the whole thing with a coat of paste wax and buff. The wax will keep the piece from getting dirty from handling. To bring out the chip marks from carving, the following pieces have been lightly sanded with fine sandpaper before waxing.



These pieces have been painted, lightly sanded and waxed with paste wax.

If we want to create future stewards for the land, kids need to be taught to love wild places at the earliest possible age. At this level, the love for those places is best taught by hands-on interaction with natural things. So - find a kid, go to the woods and make stuff. It works.