

Charcloth Firestarter: DIY



Charcloth is the best tinder you can get to catch a spark from flint and steel. You can't buy it. To make it, you need a small steel can with a tight lid. Punch a 1/16" hole in the lid with a nail, as in the center photo. Charcloth is on the right.

Now get some 100-percent cotton cloth. An old T-shirt works great. Cut it into 1.5" to 2" squares. Put them into the steel can and put the lid on tightly. The first photo shows cloth squares, with a 25¢ coin for scale.

Your almost-sealed steel can highly heats its contents without letting air in for combustion. You're going to carbonize the cloth and make it into charcoal. Or char(red)cloth. This will take heat. Don't do this indoors!

The traditional way is to burn your campfire down to coals. Put the steel can in the coals and cover it with hot coals. Smoke will come out of the hole. Leave the can in the coals until the smoke quits. Or leave it overnight, if you wish.

An alternate way is to use a propane camping stove, as in the picture on the right. To keep the sides of the steel can very hot, cut up a bigger can to use as a heat shield. This isn't required, but it is more efficient. Turn the propane flame very low. This can smoked for 2 hours, and it cooled 2 hours longer.

When you open the *COOL* can, your charcloth should be black and flexible. If it is flaky or has any brown on it, you didn't cook it long enough. Cook it some more. Then take a piece of charcloth and test it with flint and steel to see if it will catch a spark. When it does, there will be a bright red spot on the charcloth! It will expand if you blow gently on it.

To start a campfire, wrap your charcloth in tinder (such as dry grass). Remember heat rises. Put the ball of tinder where it will do the most good to start your fire. Make your spark. Blow on the charcloth until the tinder catches fire. Store your unused charcloth in a watertight container such as a 35mm film can.