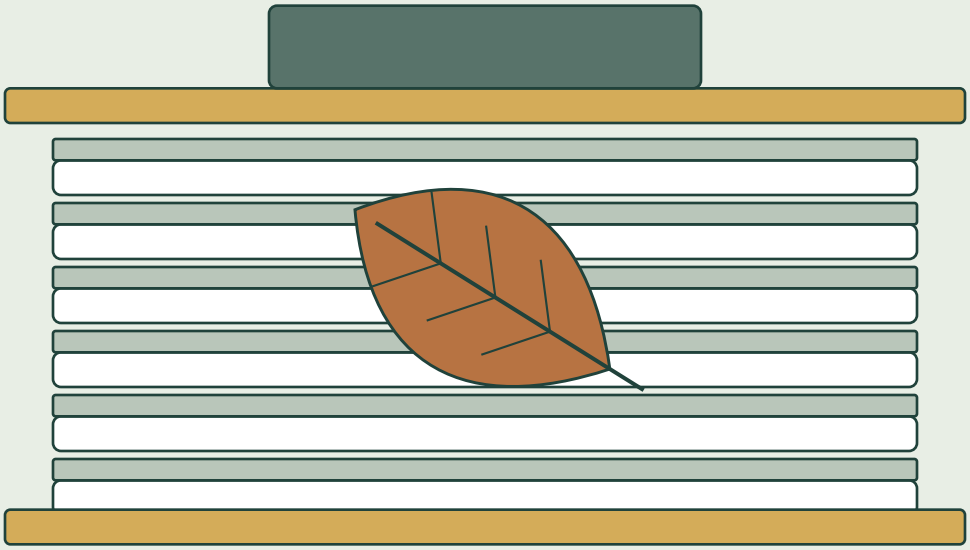
STEADLEAF PRESS

MAKE / BOTANICAL & NATURAL-MATERIAL CRAFTS

Press Autumn Leaves Without Trapping Moisture



ABSORBENT PACKETS / OPEN AIR CHANNELS

14 practical steps · Select · press · change paper · dry

Original diagrams and two printable maker records

Illustrative plans — not physical test results

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Before you start

An autumn leaf can look perfectly flat while still holding moisture in its stem or midrib. A damp leaf trapped in plastic or a closed book may stain surrounding material or develop mould. This project makes a small dedicated press for six thin, clean leaves, so that wet paper can be removed without disturbing the entire collection. The result is a set of dry, flat craft specimens and a log showing what actually happened, not a fixed drying-time promise. Use only familiar, permitted materials; do not collect from protected places or unfamiliar plants.

Materials: six sound, identified fallen leaves from your own permitted local source, two flat rigid boards about 200 by 250 mm, clean unprinted absorbent paper or blotters, corrugated cardboard with open channels, pencil, ruler, a rigid support tray, and a modest stable flat weight. Use a dedicated craft press, not a valuable book. Prepare spare dry papers and labels. Keep sharp or irritating plants, mouldy specimens, seed-bearing invasive material and contaminated leaves out of the project. Work away from food, children and pets; wash hands afterwards.

Plan the project

Use one labelled leaf per folded absorbent-paper packet. For a 200 by 250 mm board, an illustrative 160 by 210 mm packet leaves a 20 mm border all round. A leaf up to about 130 by 180 mm fits inside that packet with space for handling; actual leaf shape governs. The leaf must lie completely within the paper, with its stem and blade in the same plane. Stack the packets between clean dry corrugated spacers, with channels open at the edges. Alternate absorbent and ventilating layers rather than letting leaves touch one another. Two outer boards distribute the modest weight.

Set the press in a dry, ventilated room on a stable surface, away from sunlight, heaters and damp walls. Inspect at the next day and daily thereafter as an illustrative starting schedule; replace paper earlier whenever it is damp. Different leaves, humidity, thickness and paper absorbency change the time needed, so do not declare a batch dry on a calendar date alone. The readiness decision combines unchanged dry papers, absence of visible moisture and a stable flat appearance at successive inspections. These observations do not measure water content or eliminate every risk of mould.

Steps 01–02

1. Confirm the source and choose six leaves

Use only readily identified fallen leaves from land where collection is permitted, or responsibly supplied craft leaves. Parks Canada prohibits removing natural objects from its protected places; check other local rules and landowner permission too. Select a small number rather than stripping a plant or gathering everything in one place. Leave unknown, irritating, protected, pest-infested or seed-bearing invasive plants alone. Record the source, permission and approximate date. Avoid leaves from roadsides, treated lawns or areas with animal waste.

2. Sort by thickness and condition

Place the leaves on a clean tray. Choose thin, supple, sound blades that can lie nearly flat; avoid thick fleshy leaves, curled brittle specimens and damaged or very damp ones. Look at both sides for discoloration, insects, eggs, visible mould or contamination. Do not brush or shake a suspect leaf indoors. Exclude it and follow appropriate local disposal guidance. Keep similarly thin leaves together so a thick stem does not prevent a neighbouring specimen from receiving even pressure.

Steps 03–04

3. Remove loose surface moisture before pressing

If a suitable leaf is merely damp from dew, lay it separately on clean absorbent paper in a dry sheltered space until its surface is visibly dry. Blot gently without rubbing or folding the blade. Do not use a heat gun, microwave, oven or direct sun to rush the process. A saturated leaf belongs outside this small press exercise; choose a better specimen instead. Do not wash leaves routinely because extra water prolongs drying. Mark any leaf that still appears damp as HOLD.

4. Prepare the flat press and dry paper packets

Cut six pairs of clean absorbent sheets or fold six large sheets to the planned packet size. Number packets L1 through L6 in pencil near an outer corner. Cut or choose corrugated spacers that fit inside the boards and leave their air channels open to the edges. Confirm that both boards are smooth and flat. If a board is bowed or a spacer crushed, replace it. Keep a set of dry replacement papers beside the press, not underneath the weight.

Steps 05–06

5. Place a single leaf in each packet

Open L1, place the leaf with the blade in a natural flat orientation and gently extend the stem without forcing it. Do not stack one leaf on another or trap a folded tip. Leave clear paper around all edges. Close the packet and note the starting outline in Record 1. If the stem is much thicker than the blade, choose a thinner specimen or dry it separately; pressing harder may tear the tissue. Repeat for the other five leaves.

6. Assemble the ventilated stack

Lay the lower board on the tray, add a dry corrugated spacer, then a closed leaf packet, then another spacer. Repeat the packet-and-spacer sequence until all six are separated. Add the upper board. Orient the open channels so air can reach the stack edges; do not wrap the entire press in plastic. Check that no packet protrudes or touches a wet or dirty surface. Pattern 1 shows the repeated cross-section. The actual thickness of your stack will depend on the leaves and cardboard.

Steps 07–08

7. Apply even, modest pressure

Place the press on a low stable table. Centre a flat weight that the boards and table can comfortably support, avoiding a precarious pile of books or heavy objects above the edge. The purpose is to hold the sheets in contact, not to crush thick stems. Look from all four sides: boards should remain level and packets should not slide out. If the stack leans, reduce and restack it. Do not clamp with excessive force or lift the weighted press as a unit.

8. Choose a drying location and set the first check

Keep the press dry, ventilated and protected from disturbance, away from a bathroom, cooking area, direct sun or humid basement. Write the start date and next inspection in Record 1. An inspection on the following day is a useful starting point, not a guaranteed schedule. Check sooner if paper feels damp at the edges or the room becomes humid. Do not add a closed bag around the press to protect the colours; trapping water defeats the design.

Steps 09–10

9. Open one packet at a time and change damp paper

Remove the weight and upper board on a clear table. Keep packets in numbered order. Open the first packet slowly; support the leaf on its paper if it sticks, rather than peeling hard. Inspect the paper near the midrib and stem. If damp, stained by moisture or soft, slide the leaf onto fresh dry absorbent paper if it releases without damage. Replace damp corrugated spacers too. Record the change and reassemble the same order. Repeat for each packet.

10. Watch for deterioration instead of trying to rescue it

At each check look for wet spots, persistent dampness, visible fuzzy growth, unusual deterioration or insects. Remove suspect packets from the craft area without disturbing spores or pests; do not sniff closely, scrub, bake or seal them into finished work. Seek appropriate disposal guidance and replace contaminated paper or unsuitable press materials. If a leaf simply curls while still damp, place it back on dry paper and gently re-press. A brittle leaf that cracks should be retired rather than forcibly flattened.

Steps 11–12

11. Record flatness without stretching the leaf

On a clean flat sheet, compare the blade outline with the starting sketch. Look for a raised edge, curled tip or twisted stem. Write FLAT, SLIGHT CURL or CURLED as a visual description. Do not press down with a ruler to make the observation look better. If useful, record an approximate maximum raised edge against a nearby scale without pushing it down; write NOT MEASURED if unsure. Keep a curled leaf for a three-dimensional project only if fully dry and otherwise sound.

12. Decide whether drying is complete

When the paper remains dry and the leaf appears dry throughout, including the thicker midrib, replace the paper and check again at a later inspection. A stable appearance and no new dampness across successive checks support readiness for this craft, but they are not an instrument measurement. If uncertain, continue the dry-paper cycle instead of transferring to a closed enclosure. Do not bend the leaf to prove dryness: a dry leaf can be fragile. Label each packet individually, since one leaf may need longer than another.

Steps 13–14

13. Transfer the ready leaves to flat storage

Use a clean dry paper folder or shallow supported paper box. Keep each leaf between sheets with its identifying label beside it. Do not stack heavy objects directly on delicate blades. Keep the storage dry, dark and away from damp floors, food or insects. Do not laminate or seal a specimen whose dryness remains uncertain. Recheck the storage periodically, especially after humid weather. A faded colour is a natural change, not a reason to moisten a dried leaf.

14. Complete the drying and flatness record

Record each leaf code, paper changes, visible condition and final disposition READY FOR CRAFT, CONTINUE DRYING or DISCARD/HOLD. Include the date and any reason a specimen was removed. Retain the log with the collection for the next project. Clean and dry the press before storing it; replace damaged papers. For an important keepsake, use a photograph rather than assuming a dried leaf will remain unchanged forever. No duration, colour retention or complete absence of mould is certified by this exercise.

Fix, care and preserve

Paper still damp. Change both paper and affected spacers; improve room ventilation. Do not simply increase weight.

Leaf stuck to paper. Support it and avoid pulling. If necessary retain the backing or reject the specimen.

Edges curl. Use a thinner leaf and even flat support; re-press only while suitably pliable.

Suspected mould or pests. Isolate without brushing or sniffing; discard or seek appropriate advice. Do not use in a collage.

Dry leaves crumble. Handle with a supporting card, not by the stem; use fewer transfers and retire damaged pieces.

Source & evidence boundary

Original Steadleaf English prose, calculations, vector artwork, diagrams and maker records. The following sources provide factual context, not certification of this design. Follow actual component instructions and local collection, disposal and plant-movement rules.

Parks Canada, Visitor guidelines
https://parks.canada.ca/voyage-travel/regles-rules

University of Missouri Extension, Drying Flowers and Foliage for Arrangements
https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g6540

Canadian Conservation Institute, Caring for paper objects
https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/preventive-conservation/guidelines-collections/paper-objects.html

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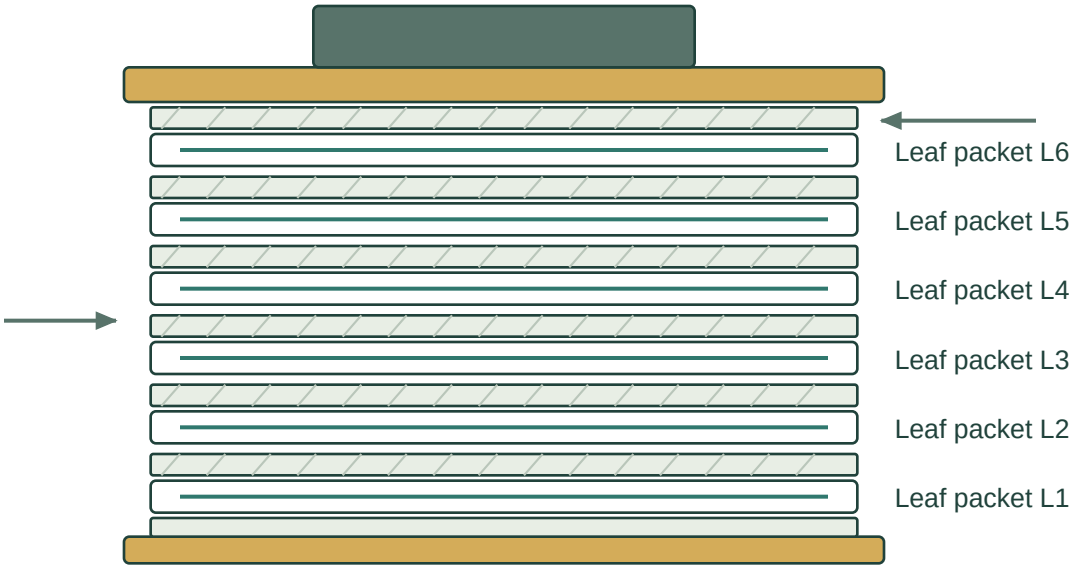
Ventilated leaf press

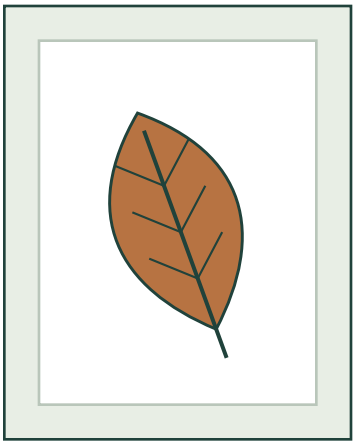
A section through two rigid boards, corrugated spacers and individual absorbent-paper packets. A sample 160 x 210 mm packet sits within a 200 x 250 mm board with 20 mm margins; no material thickness or weight rating is implied.

A / PRESS CROSS-SECTION



Dry absorbent sheets + open corrugated channels; outer boards distribute weight.

B / EXAMPLE PACKET IN THE BOARD



Board 200 x 250 mm

Packet 160 x 210 mm

Margin 20 mm each side

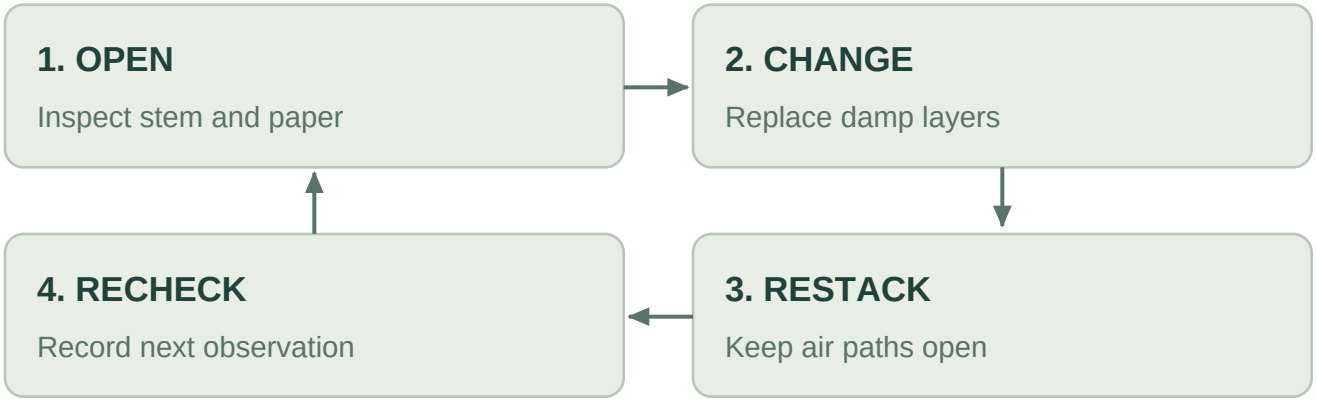
One specimen per packet

Illustrative, not a cut template

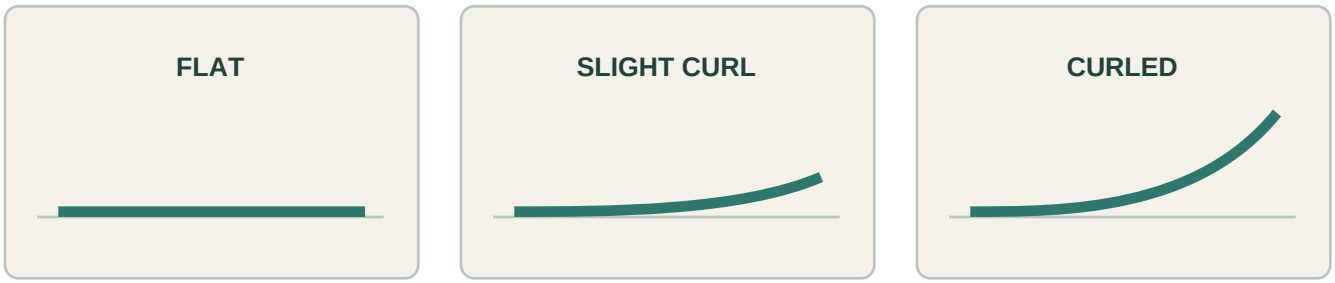
Dryness and flatness decision

A paper-change loop and three edge profiles, with a readiness gate requiring successive dry-paper observations. Record actual conditions, not a prescribed drying duration.

A / CHANGE-PAPER LOOP



B / DESCRIBE FLATNESS WITHOUT PUSHING



READY FOR CRAFT?

Successive observations: dry papers, dry-looking specimen, no visible deterioration.

If uncertain: continue drying or isolate / discard. No moisture-content measurement.

Leaf intake and drying log

Enter actual observations only. Mark missing information UNKNOWN or NOT CHECKED. This is a craft record, not a safety or preservation certificate.

Leaf ID / species if known / permitted source

Collection date / surface and initial condition

Start date / packet size / press location

First check: date / paper dry or damp / change

Second check: date / paper dry or damp / change

Further check dates / spacer changes

Flatness / stem condition / visible deterioration

Next inspection / action / reason

Final flatness and storage

Enter actual observations only. Mark missing information UNKNOWN or NOT CHECKED. This is a craft record, not a safety or preservation certificate.

Leaf ID / last two inspection dates

Paper remained dry? / uncertainty

Blade, midrib and stem condition

Flatness: FLAT / SLIGHT CURL / CURLED

Optional raised edge observation / NOT MEASURED

Disposition: READY / CONTINUE DRYING / HOLD-DISCARD

Storage folder ID / location / care

Date / next review trigger