



Nature Printing: A Judy's Day Activity

Text and photos by Raylene Ludgate, Judy's Day Youth Education Coordinator

Materials:

Brayer (a printer's hand-inking roller)

For this activity, you'll need a rubber roller on a handle; this is called a brayer. Mine are made by Speedball, with soft rubber rollers three to four inches wide. They cost around \$10 each, and can be purchased in art supply, craft, and hobby stores.

Block Printing Inks (water-soluble)

Speedball also makes tubes of water-soluble block printing inks that are available in 15 brilliant colors. Two or three colors per print produce a very nice effect. If you're working with groups, you'll need the large five-ounce tubes; these cost about \$10 each. The ink is also available in jars but I find the squeeze tubes easier to use. If you can't find the brayers or inks locally, visit www.speedballart.com

Assorted Leaves (freshly picked, or place stems in water upon picking)

I collect a variety of branches from trees and stems from weeds, and place them in buckets of water.

Tray(s)

I use one large plastic tray (12" by 12") for each child, to hold the ink and confine the work area. At an event, I might have three trays set up with different colors at each work table. Kids choose a tray and wait their turn.

Tweezers

For each tray, you'll need one straight-handled pair of tweezers to lift off leaves and place them on the paper.

Paper

Regular Xerox paper, blank note cards purchased in bulk, paper bags, brown craft paper, or any absorbent paper will work well for this activity.

Plain Newsprint

Plain newsprint is used to transfer the ink from leaf to paper. I have on hand pieces cut to the size of the card or other paper we're working with.

Wet Sponge

I usually conduct this activity outside on a plastic-covered table—and I don't worry too much about the mess! However, it's handy to have something to wipe off inked fingers, if children or parents request it.

Nature printing—the process of directly re-creating a natural object image using a pigment—was introduced to me by Plantations friend and retired Ithaca school teacher Betty Shannon. During her summer visits, Betty would collect a few leaves and flowers from our herb garden and proceed to create gorgeous artwork right in our offices, in minutes! Simple equipment, an endless variety of results, and numerous uses for the artwork make this activity fun for kids (age four and up), as well as adults. When the kids are done, together you can admire the prominent veins and intriguing shapes of the leaves within these beautiful creations.

This activity lets families get creative together. It's easy to do, and with a little practice the results are rewarding. When I lead this activity at events, parents often ask about the ink and roller, so they can have the same fun at home. Designing cards to send to friends, creating invitations to a party, or decorating paper party bags are just a few practical uses for the resulting artwork. We recently discovered that nature printing is also a great way to turn plain brown paper into fancy wrapping paper, featuring artwork in the recipient's favorite colors!

Nature printing is a centuries-old technique that has been used both as an aid to study botany and as an art form. When I use this activity with school classes to teach about the movement of water and food within a leaf, students really notice the details of leaf venation. This also makes a great outdoor plant-related activity for various festivals and events. We made hundreds of thank-you cards with children at a recent Ithaca Festival in which gratitude was the theme. Panoramas of nature prints were created at another event. At this year's local Ithaca Festival, nature prints of wind-pollinated grasses will complement the "catch the wind" theme!

Activity:

The time needed for this activity varies. It only takes a few minutes to create a print, and another five minutes for it to dry. However, the activity is such fun, kids may want to do it all day!

First, pick two or three colors that would look nice together for a leaf shape. Sometimes we use unnatural colors like silver, white, and violet. During the fall we may select red, yellow, and orange for a more natural look. When I am trying to mimic a real leaf color in summer, I use green with small amounts of red or white mixed together.

I usually squeeze the ink onto the trays myself throughout the day in order to control the amount and avoid wasting ink. Squeeze a glob of each of your colors onto a large tray in separate spots. Then use your brayer to spread the ink out evenly, overlapping parts of each color with the other colors. I have one brayer per tray, but you can use more brayers to keep the colors separate.

(continued)



Roll the inked brayer over the leaves.



Use tweezers to lift the leaf off the paper.



Bring a beautifully wrapped gift to your next party!

If the colors become too muddy after repeated spreading, the water soluble ink washes easily off the trays. You can then resume with fresh colors.

Children then choose their leaves, or entire stems, such as small grasses. Flowers are more of a challenge because they are usually quite fragile, but these can work well with older children or adults. The children place their chosen leaves onto the color combinations they like best, and roll the previously inked brayer carefully over their leaves. Note how much ink is on top of the leaf; if it doesn't look evenly covered, have the child use the brayer to pick up more ink from the tray, and roll over the leaf again. From my experience, the most common mistake is to use too much ink; this fills in all the details. If this happens, you can blot the leaf with newsprint and reuse it—this time using less ink! Once both sides of the leaf are colored, decide which side you want to show on your paper or card. Often the side with the most prominent veins will transfer details best.

Have the paper or card handy for the leaf or leaves. Using the tweezers, carefully pick up each leaf by the petiole (the stem that attaches the leaf to its twig) and gradually lift it off the tray. You'll soon find out which leaves are too fragile. Simple leaves without any fern-like foliage work best for younger hands.

Place all your leaves artistically onto your paper, card, or bag. It is important to not move the leaves once they have been set down on the paper. Then take a piece of plain newsprint large enough to cover all the leaves and place it on top. Feeling the leaves underneath, rub firmly with your fingers to transfer the color, making sure to include the edges and entire area of each leaf. Avoid moving either the leaf or newsprint. Lift off the newsprint and voila! There is your nature print.

At an event with lots of children, the newsprint paper can be eliminated. When folded over, the back of a blank card can serve equally well as a blotter—with the added advantage of having the image appear on both the front and the back of the card! Once I used manila folders cut into thirds the long way; we placed the leaves on one side, and then folded it over to blot. The result was a great panorama displaying both sides of the leaf.

Sometimes the leaf sticks to the paper and sometimes to the newsprint, so just use your tweezers to lift off the leaf, and put it in a compost bag. Examine both the newsprint and paper. Sometimes the newsprint shows greater detail, so next time we'll reverse the leaf and print its other side. Surprise is half the fun!

At one event, the children discovered that immature poppy seed heads make

great stamps. We collected green poppy heads in different sizes and the children (especially the younger ones) had fun putting the poppy heads in ink and stamping them on paper.

Finally, you might want to have a pencil handy so everyone can sign and label their work. You can hang the wet prints from clothespins on a clothes line, or on a table to dry. Depending on the amount of ink and on the weather, drying usually takes just a few minutes.

Our Judy's Day event on grasses, "Grains Galore and a Whole Lot More," coming up on September 18, 2005, may include grass leaf rubbings to visually distinguish grass leaves from other leaves with branching venation. (Like other monocots, the veins on grasses run parallel to each other along the entire length of the leaf.)

Please send any comments, critiques, or questions about this activity to Raylene Ludgate, Judy's Day Youth Education Coordinator, at 607-255-2407 or RGL3@cornell.edu.

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