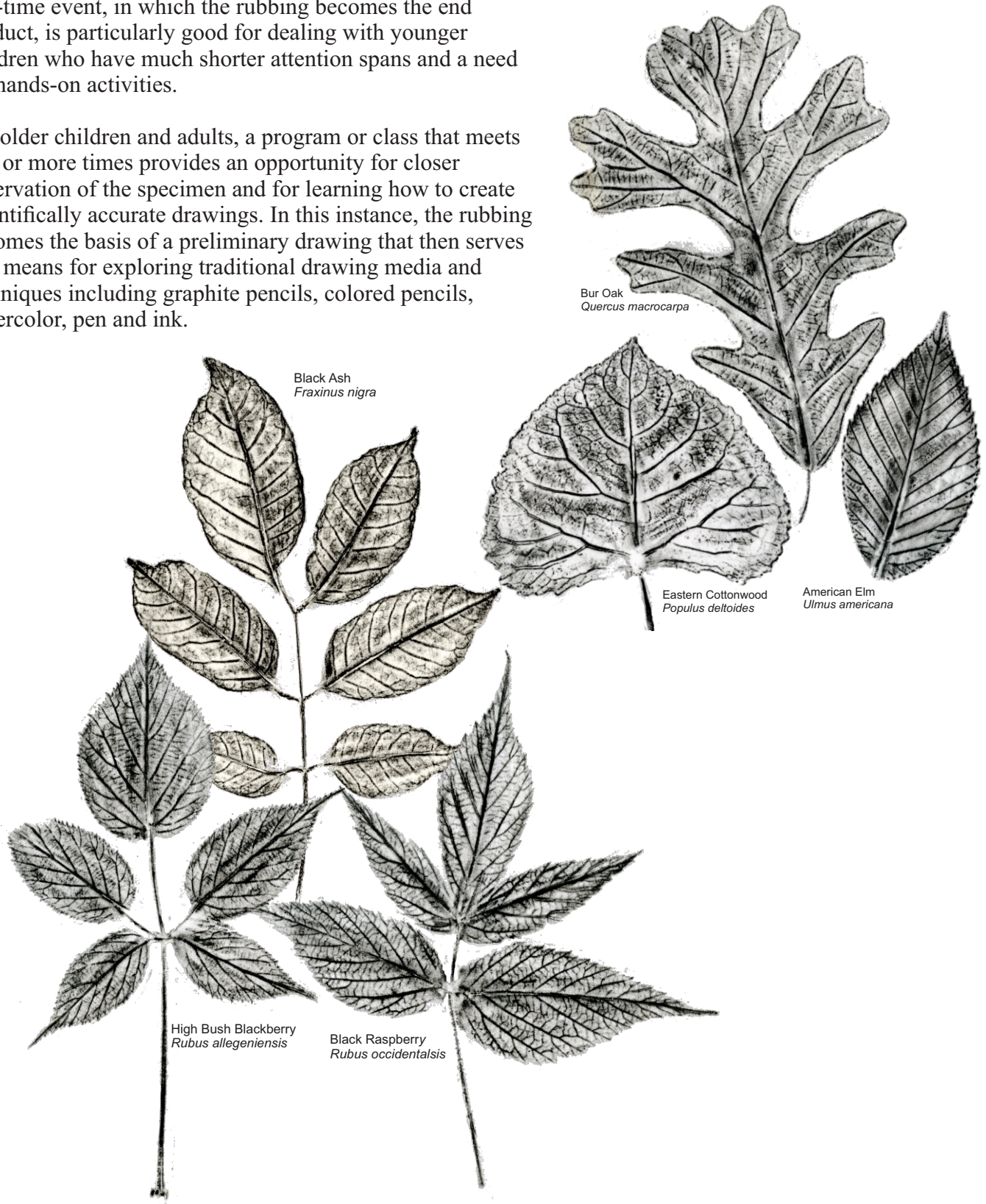


# The Art and Science of Leaf Rubbing

by Gail Selfridge

Making leaf rubbings is a good way to introduce the appreciation of nature and science, and it can be used as part of educational programs for both children and adults. As a one-time event, in which the rubbing becomes the end product, is particularly good for dealing with younger children who have much shorter attention spans and a need for hands-on activities.

For older children and adults, a program or class that meets two or more times provides an opportunity for closer observation of the specimen and for learning how to create scientifically accurate drawings. In this instance, the rubbing becomes the basis of a preliminary drawing that then serves as a means for exploring traditional drawing media and techniques including graphite pencils, colored pencils, watercolor, pen and ink.



Black Ash  
*Fraxinus nigra*

Bur Oak  
*Quercus macrocarpa*

Eastern Cottonwood  
*Populus deltoides*

American Elm  
*Ulmus americana*

High Bush Blackberry  
*Rubus allegheniensis*

Black Raspberry  
*Rubus occidentalis*

## Supplies and Technique

The basic leaf rubbing process is very simple and requires few materials. Broken pieces of ordinary school crayons can be used. Next best is pressed crayons similar to Prang Crayograph and Prang Kindograph. If you can afford it, and want to go first class, try gravestone rubbing wax. Black gives the best impression but various colors can be used for special effects if the rubbing is to be the end product.

Paper needs to be smooth and lightweight. Avoid heavy papers or coated ones. Tracing paper works well, particularly if preliminary drawings are to be made from the rubbings.

The top of a leaf is usually smoother than the underside where the ribs and veins are more prominent. Try rubbing both sides to see the difference. Place the leaf on a hard, smooth surface, and cover it with paper. Press on the paper to hold the leaf in place. Use the crayon to make firm but not hard strokes that bring out the delicate shape.

This sounds easy, but it takes a bit of practice. Here are a few suggestions: Use the broad side of the crayon rather than the point and apply even pressure to one small area at a time. With your fingers, hold the paper in place to avoid slipping. Do not go back over any area that is finished to avoid getting a double line.

It is possible to use large specimens or delicate ferns but make your life easy and start by selecting leaves that are sturdy and a manageable size. What is available depends upon your location, but some that work well include Elm, Maple, Cottonwood, Oak, Ginkgo, and Strawberry.

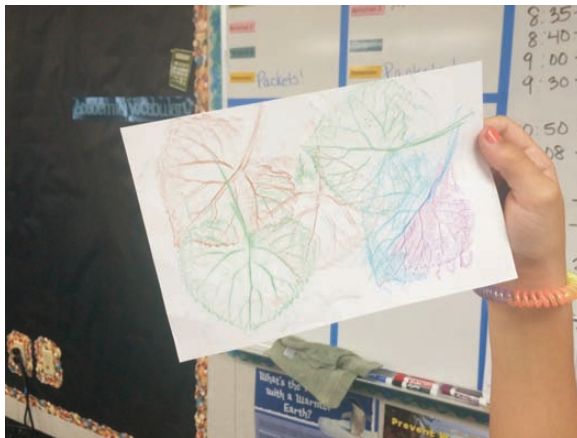


## The Finished Work

Once finished it is important to organize and display the works. This can be done in purely artistic ways or as a means of learning how to identify plants by their foliage rather than by their blossoms.

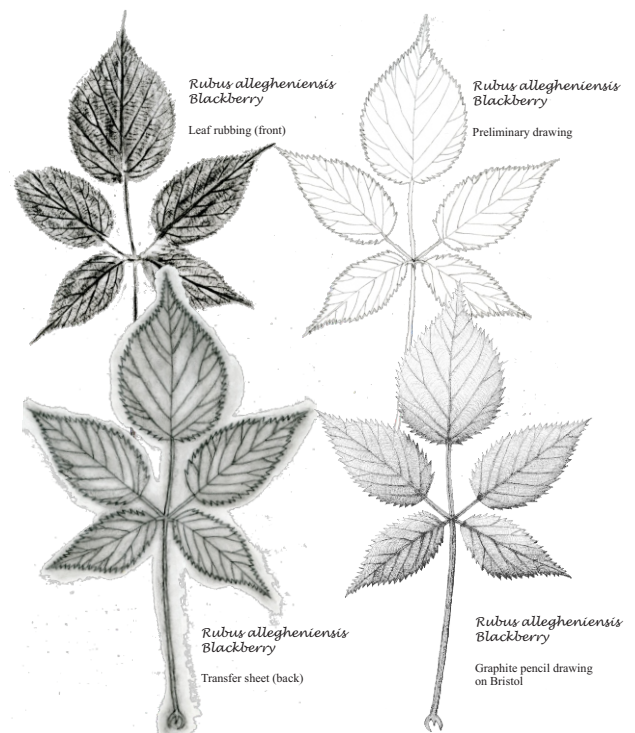
Rubbings can be cut out and arranged on a background. They can be organized either as a simple or technical collection and grouped by size, shape, or vein pattern. They can be kept in a scrapbook, photo album, portfolio, or made into a booklet to show the trees/plants in your own yard, in your neighborhood, or in your state.

Temporary exhibits can be arranged on a bulletin board. Finished works can be displayed by matting and framing or by mounting them on matboard. They can be mounted on a roll of paper creating a scroll; it can then be attached to a dowel and hung vertically.



## Creating Drawings from Rubbings

*Colorful Leaves*, a publication/program funded by the Anne Ophelia Dowden Award from the American Society of Botanical Artists, provides information and tools for using leaf rubbings as the basis for creating scientifically accurate drawings. It is available to everyone as a free download on the official ASBA site: <https://www.asba-art.org/node/13130>



## Educational Outreach Programs

Educational outreach programs that feature leaf rubbing are appropriate for schools, Scout and 4-H groups, garden shows, museum and botanical garden events; these are often one-time events that are directed to groups of either children or adults. Sometimes there will be mixed ages such as children and their parents and the presenter needs to be prepared. Not only does the presenter need to be familiar and experienced with the leaf rubbing process, it is important to provide those in attendance with suitable art supplies and appropriate specimens as well. Do not let students search out leaves to use because time will be wasted and unsuitable, i.e. difficult, material will always be found. You need to provide sheets of paper, crayons, an assortment of medium size leaves that are sturdy, and a good table or rubbing surface.

Be prepared to demonstrate the technique, answer questions, and either show or recommend ways in which the rubbings and/or subsequent drawings can be used. Always end each session on a positive note through exhibits of their work and encourage participants to continue learning about art and science by exploring the world around them and then recording the plants and animals they find there in nature journals, scrapbooks, drawings, and photos.

