

Nature Paintbrushes: Messy Summer Fun with Sticks and Leaves

Crafts | Summer | Ages 2-4

Last week we spent twenty minutes in our backyard collecting leaves, and my daughter turned them into the weirdest paintbrushes I've ever seen. Best part? She was so proud of them she didn't want to use regular brushes for the rest of the afternoon.

This is one of those activities that takes five minutes to set up and keeps toddlers busy way longer than you'd expect. You're basically making paintbrushes out of whatever nature stuff you can find, then letting kids go wild with paint. It's messy. It's weird. They love it.

What You Need

- Sticks (6-8 inches long work best — not too bendy)
- Leaves, flower petals, pine needles, or small ferns
- Rubber bands or twine
- Washable tempera paint
- Paper (we use butcher paper or the back of wrapping paper rolls)
- Small bowls or plates for paint
- Something to protect your surface (old newspapers, a plastic tablecloth)

How to Make Them

Take your stick and hold a leaf or a few pine needles against one end. Wrap a rubber band around them a few times until they're secure. That's it. You've made a nature paintbrush.

We made about six different ones — a dandelion brush, a maple leaf brush, one with those helicopters that fall from trees, and a few pine needle ones. My daughter kept trying to tie grass, which didn't work at all, but she had fun trying.

Pro tip: if you're using flower petals, they fall apart fast. Make those last so they're fresh when you paint.

The Painting Part

Pour paint into shallow bowls. Let your kid dip the nature brush and stamp it onto paper. The patterns are actually really cool — leaves make veiny prints, pine needles make spiky clusters, flowers make soft blobs.

Toddlers will not use these like normal paintbrushes. They'll smash them. They'll drag them. They'll dip them seventeen times in a row. Just roll with it.

What Actually Happens Your kid will spend more time making brushes than painting. Ours kept running back outside to find "better leaves." The painting session lasted maybe ten minutes, but the whole activity killed a good hour.

The rubber bands are tricky for little hands. You'll need to help with that part. We tried twine once and it was way harder — stick with rubber bands.

Kansas City Note

We collected our supplies at Loose Park during a morning walk. The big trees near the Rose Garden drop perfect leaves

and sticks. If you're near Shawnee Mission Park, the pine trees by the marina have great needles for this.

Clean-up is easier outside. We do this on our driveway now instead of inside because the leaves shed bits everywhere.

