

LEAF PRINTS

Supplies needed: Leaves, stamp pads, watercolor or gouache and a palette to mix the colors; a wide brush (1" foam or bristle); lots of scrap paper (catalogs, telephone books); papers and envelopes. Once you get some experience, try acrylics on paper or fabric

Leaf (or nature) prints are a very quick and easy way to decorate paper and fabrics. You can use watercolors, gouache or acrylics, depending on the depth of color and permanence you want.

Leaves need to be picked when mature – leaves picked in the spring are too young and sappy, they need to be older and tougher to make a good impression. Pick your leaves and press – an old telephone book is ideal, and you can weight it down with other books or heavy objects. Leave them for at least a week.

The very simplest method is this: take your leaf, press the underside (where the veins are prominent) on a rubber stamp pad, and place on, say, an envelope. Cover the leaf with a piece of scrap paper and gently press with your finger to make sure that the whole surface of the leaf is in contact with the paper, then carefully lift up the paper and the leaf. A pair of tweezers with rounded ends can be very useful to grasp the stalk of the leaf to remove it cleanly. Envelopes and plain bond paper are good to practice on, and you can use them afterwards.

Next, try watercolor or gouache. Mix up some colors on a palette, paint them on the underside of the leaf and press as above. Remember to use more than one color – when you look at a leaf which is changing color it frequently has several different shades – some green, perhaps, yellow, orange, red, purple or brown. So pick a couple of colors to try and achieve a natural look. As the palette gets a bit muddy the results are frequently more realistic.

The most fun is to try making your own wrapping paper. For this I prefer to use acrylics printed on that black paper one can buy by the foot. You will need a large surface, but the procedure is the same – paint on the color(s) you want, stamp the leaf on the paper using a cover sheet and then pick it up carefully. It might be good to do this wearing a pair of latex gloves as one frequently ends up with 'auto mechanic hands', and acrylics take a while to wear off. Mix metallic colors in with the regular ones and the results will be pretty spectacular. Remember to keep moving over your work surface as the acrylics will take longer to dry and you don't want to mess up that perfect impression you just made. You can always overlap, of course.

You can also try stamping with acrylics on fabric – say a t-shirt which needs some pizzaz. Provided you leave the paint to set for a while (a couple of days at least), and then iron it, the color should be permanent.