

Introduction to Natural Printing

Have you ever picked up a leaf and noticed all the little lines, bumps, and shapes? Nature is full of beautiful textures and patterns—just waiting to be turned into art!

In this activity pack, you'll learn how to make your own **natural prints** using leaves, flowers, bark, and more. You'll also discover how different artists have used nature in their work and try out their ideas in your own way.

What's Inside?

You'll explore natural printing through the eyes of five different artists:

- **Alois Auer** – who invented a way to press real leaves onto printing plates
 - **Henry Bradbury** – who made amazing fern books using Auer's nature-printing technique
 - **Bryan Nash Gill** – who printed tree trunks to show their beautiful rings
 - **India Flint** – who made cloth prints using real plants and natural dyes
 - **Laura Donkers** – who prints and rubs textures she finds outside, right in nature
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What You'll Do

You'll go on nature walks, collect natural treasures, and use safe, creative printing techniques to:

- Press and print leaves and petals
 - Rub textures onto paper
 - Make your own "tree ring" wood prints
 - Print onto fabric using flowers and steam
 - Create your own nature-inspired art journal
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Why Try Natural Printing?

- It helps you see the world around you more closely

- It's fun and relaxing
- You'll make art that's totally unique—just like nature!

Let's get started and turn leaves, trees, and petals into works of art! 🌸 🖨️ 🍂

Alois Auer von Welsbach (1813–1869)

- Auer was an Austrian printer, inventor, and botanical illustrator.
- He directed the Imperial and Royal State Printing House in Vienna from 1841, pioneering several printing innovations.
- In 1853, he published *The Discovery of the Nature Printing Process*—a four-language exposition of his invention.
- His legacy includes early examples of printed photography and the nature-printing method that influenced botanical printing worldwide



His Techniques Explained

Auer's nature-printing (German: *Naturselbstdruck*) involved:

- **Impressing real specimens** (leaves, flowers, even fossils) between a smooth steel plate and a soft lead plate under high pressure via rollers.
- **Creating an intaglio impression** in the lead plate with fine natural texture.
- **Inking the lead plate** directly and printing onto paper.
- For larger print runs, an electrotpe copper plate was made from the lead original [Flickr+9Wikipedia+9Wikipedia+9georgeglazer.com](#).
- This method captured stunning botanical detail—down to every vein and midrib—without manual engraving.

Project Ideas in Auer's Style

Explore Auer-inspired nature-printing using safe, modern materials:

- Flatten leaves or flowers and **gently roll them onto soft clay or plasticine** to replicate the impression process.

- Use **ink or poster paint** to coat the impressed surface, then press paper over it to create a print.
 - Record seasonal changes by printing **fresh leaves, dry leaves, and petals**, comparing textures.
 - Experiment with **thin materials**—e.g., lace or fabric—to mimic Auer's broader use of non-botanical items.
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Henry Bradbury (1829–1860)

- Henry Riley Bradbury was born in 1829 in Clerkenwell, London
- He was the eldest son of printer William Bradbury.
- He studied at Vienna's Imperial Printing Office under Alois Auer and patented his own version of nature-printing upon returning to England.
- In 1855, he published *The Ferns of Great Britain and Ireland* using this method, and later produced *The Nature-Printed British Sea-Weeds* (1859–60).
- Bradbury also co-founded Bradbury & Wilkinson, a pioneering banknote printing firm



Bradbury's Nature-Printing Technique

Bradbury refined Auer's process, which involves:

- **Pressing real plant specimens**—such as ferns or seaweeds—into a soft lead plate to capture every vein and texture in intaglio form.
- Creating a **durable lead impression**, from which an **electrotype copper plate** was often made for printing.
- **Inking the plate** and printing onto paper, sometimes followed by hand-colouring for added visual appeal.
- This process ensured botanical accuracy and beautiful detail, ideal for scientific illustration during the Victorian "fern fever" era

Project Ideas: Work in Bradbury's Style

Experiment with a Victorian-inspired nature-printing project:

- **Press** plant specimens into soft clay or play-dough

- **Ink and print:** cover the impressed surface with washable ink or tempera, then press paper to capture the textures.
 - **Layer and colour:** print multiple plant types on the same sheet, then lightly add colour with pencils or watercolour.
 - **Create a booklet:** collect prints seasonally, label them with common names, and bind into a small nature journal à la Bradbury.
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Bryan Nash Gill (1961–2013)

- Born in the USA on a Connecticut farm
- pursued a BFA at Tulane and an MFA at California College of Arts
- Initially working in glass and ceramics, he transitioned to wood-based art
- From his rural studio, he made daily walks in the woods and collected fallen trees from his land for inspiration
- His acclaimed book *Woodcut* (2012) showcases his signature prints



His Technique

- Gill carved cross-sections from fallen logs—oak, ash, willow—flattened and inked their surfaces, then pressed damp Japanese or washi paper by hand to transfer the wood's unique texture and age rings.
- Using fingertip pressure instead of mechanical presses, he captured both fine growth rings and bark details, creating prints that read like natural history records—striking, organic, and deeply textured
- The images above are Bryan's authentic relief prints, each revealing intricate patterns of tree rings and wood grain.
- Their scale is often large, with some prints over a metre wide
- They appear in neutral single- or two-colour palettes (e.g. black, sepia, red), emphasising natural textures.
- Bryan Nash Gill's work blends personal history, ecological storytelling, and craftsmanship, perfect for young artists who love exploring outdoors and creating art that tells a story

Project Ideas

Try these safe, hands-on mini projects to explore nature printing in Bryan's style:

- **Wood Cookie Impressions**

Collect fallen small-diameter branches (3–5 cm).

Sand flat the stump end, roll ink or paint onto it, and press damp paper firmly with hands to transfer the rings.

- **Family Tree Memories**

Print cross-sections from different branches or fallen logs.

Compare ring patterns and textures—notice unique growth histories!

- **Composite Tree Portrait**

Print multiple tree slices in one composition.

Add subtle wash of natural colours (light brown or green) over the print for effect.

- **Fingerprint Study of Trees**

Use playable clay to press wood cross-sections, creating models.

Ink the clay models and print to replicate Gill's intaglio-style process.

India Flint: The Botanical Alchemist

- India Flint (b. 1958) is an Australian-born textile artist, writer, and educator based in South Australia.
- Raised between Australia and Canada, she learned natural dyeing from her grandmother.
- Today, she is celebrated as the originator of the **eucalyptus eco-print**, a method she began publicly sharing in 1999.
- Flint is known for her deep commitment to sustainability and slow-fashion principles, using locally foraged plants and repurposed fabrics to weave nature into her art.
- She teaches globally and has authored the influential book *Eco Colour: Botanical Dyes for Beautiful Textiles*



Her Contact-Printing Technique

- **Foraged plant materials** (leaves, petals, twigs) are arranged on textile or paper.
- The fabric is **bundled tightly**, often wrapped in natural fibers and steamed or boiled.
- Heat and pressure transfer natural pigments directly into the surface in a process dubbed **botanical alchemy**
- Flint often combines these prints with **slow stitching, assemblage, and text**, creating layered, memory-rich works that map her connection to place and travel

Project Ideas: Work in Her Style

Create art inspired by Flint's eco-printing techniques:

- **Leaf-Bundle Prints**

- Arrange eucalyptus, maple, or wild foliage on scrap cotton or paper.
 - Fold, tie, and steam or simmer the bundle for 30–60 minutes.
 - Unwrap to reveal contact prints in natural hues.
 - **Slow-Stitched Story Cloth**
 - After printing, sew simple words or doodles using sashiko or running stitch.
 - Embed personal reflections—like date, location, or mood—to make a visual journal.
 - **Palette from Place**
 - Use only foraged local plants to print.
 - Experiment with seasonal changes—compare autumn leaves vs spring blossoms.
 - **Layered Bundles**
 - Re-bundle cloth with new plant combinations—layer prints to deepen colour and texture.
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Laura Donkers:

- Laura Donkers is a UK-based ecological artist and researcher, living between the Outer Hebrides (Scotland) and New Zealand.
- She creates Ecological Print and Community Art
- With a background in horticulture and a PhD in contemporary art, she creates works rooted in co-creativity—engaging communities and environments through place-based, eco-social art practice
- Her work invites you to slow down, sense your world in new ways, and share what you notice through creative making.



Artistic Approach & Techniques

Laura Donkers works sensitively with nature and culture using a variety of methods:

- **Frottage:** Rubbing paper with charcoal or pastel to capture textures of natural surfaces like bark, grasses, and rock
- **Monoprinting with plants:** Directly printing botanical forms via pressing or rubbing—often outdoors—using local plant materials, engaging both tactile and visual senses.
- **Large-scale drawings:** Walking and drawing in situ, sometimes in wet or rugged environments, to directly record connections and place.
- These methods emphasize embodied learning, ecological awareness, and communal engagement.

Creative Ideas Inspired by Donkers

- **Outdoor frottage sketching**
Collect small bark, leaves, seed pods. Place paper over them and gently rub charcoal or crayon to reveal textures. Explore repeating patterns or overlapping outlines.

- **Botanical monoprints**
Ink a leaf or twig, press paper onto it (or vice versa) to transfer texture. You can experiment with colours or layering prints.
- **Nature-wrapped installations**
Attach printed or frotted papers to trees, rocks, or fences. Observe how they weather or change over days, reflecting environmental interaction.
- **Community print project**
Invite friends or family on a nature walk to gather materials. Each person creates a frottage or monoprint, then combine results into a collective nature journal or gallery display.
- **Reflective artist notebooks**
After making prints, write or draw about how the materials felt, smelled, or changed. Engage in embodied reflection like Donkers's practice-led research.