

# Rustic Stick Table

Turn fresh-cut branches into a charming piece  
of backyard furniture

BY DOUG STOWE



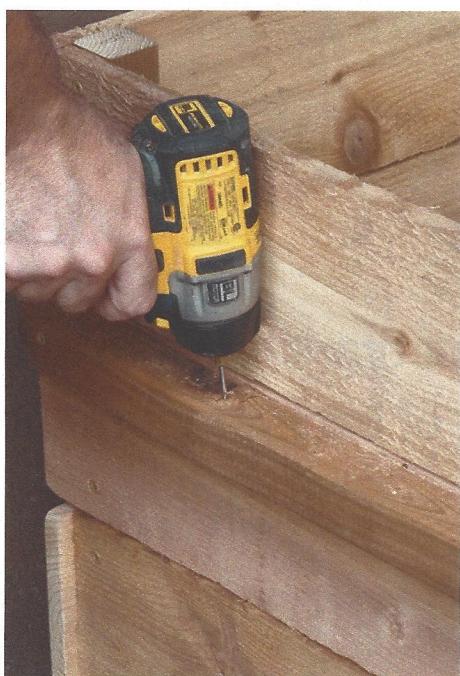
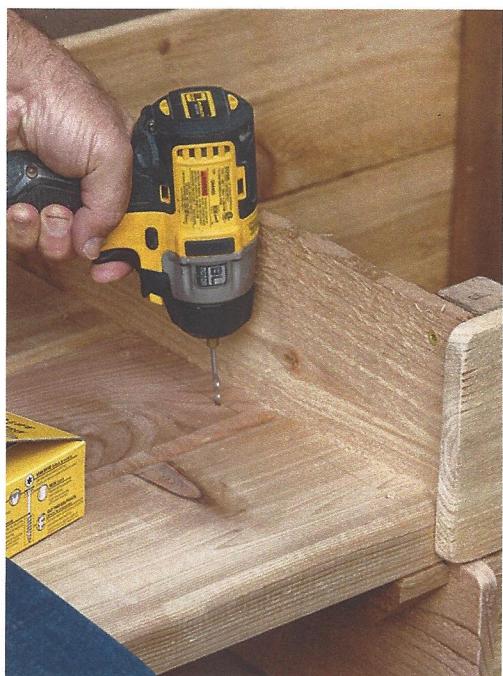
This small table is the perfect place to put a plant, drink, or tray of snacks on your deck or porch. It's made from materials harvested straight from the forest, while a piece of  $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. plywood provides the foundation for a richly textured random mosaic on top. The legs are  $1\frac{1}{2}$ -in.-thick stock cut from a sapling.

Although this table is made of fresh-cut sycamore, other woods will work, too. Willow, for example, has straight, flexible branches that are easier to arrange in a more uniform pattern. You will notice that my pattern is not completely random. I liked the way the branches looked with an angle cut on the ends. I arranged them so that the ends formed a pattern around the perimeter of the top.

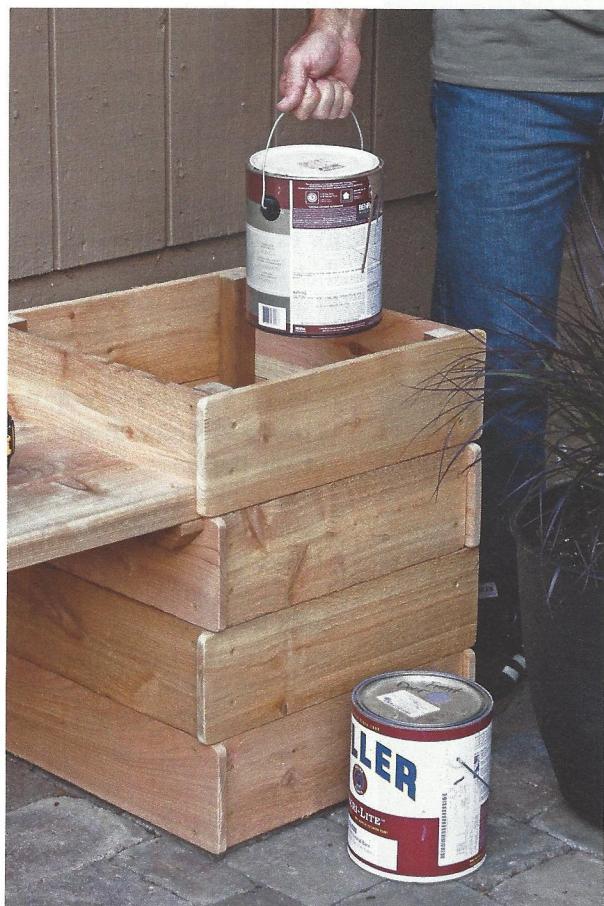
#### Build the base

The base is simple. The top's plywood substrate is screwed into the tops of the legs. Each leg gets one screw. That by itself would make for a very rickety table. However, after you've finished making the mosaic top, you'll nail four stretchers to the legs (one on each side), giving the table enough strength for its intended use.

Start by cutting the plywood top to size. This can



**A few screws make them permanent.** Drill pilot holes down into the cleats. The small bit won't reach far enough, so remove the seat boards to finish the job. Then screw them down permanently with 3-in.-long screws.

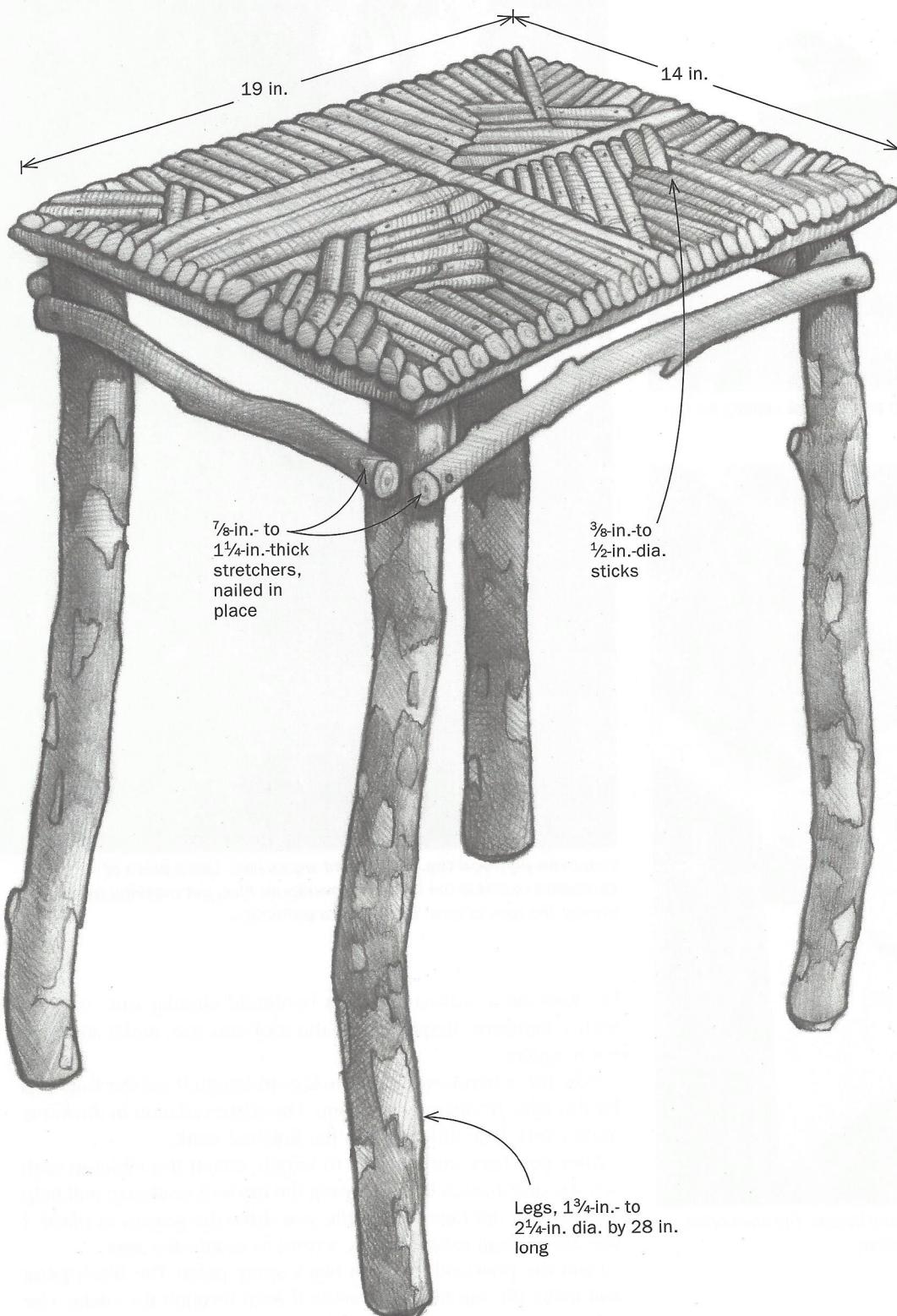


**Plants need a boost.** The plastic pots were too short for these tall planter boxes, so Christiana gave them a boost with a few old paint cans. Then the plants dropped in at the right level. You don't need to do this with the shorter version of the planter boxes.

# Square stick-and-branch table

This table is made from freshly harvested sycamore. The random mosaic pattern on the top is made of short sticks nailed to a plywood base. This simple construction technique can be used on tables of

any size and shape. Use pruning shears to cut the sticks to fit. The stretchers strengthening the legs are added on the outside using an air nailer to secure them in place.



## What you'll need

### MATERIALS

#### BALTIC-BIRCH PLYWOOD

- One top  
( $\frac{1}{2}$  in. thick by 13 in. wide by 18 in. long)

#### SYCAMORE OR OTHER FRESH-CUT HARDWOOD

(Rough cut 1 in. to 2 in. longer):

- 4 legs  
( $1\frac{3}{4}$  in. to  $2\frac{1}{4}$  in. dia.  
by 28 in. long)
- 2 aprons ( $\frac{7}{8}$  in. to  $1\frac{1}{8}$  in. dia. by  $17\frac{1}{2}$  in. long)
- 2 aprons ( $\frac{7}{8}$  in. to  $1\frac{1}{8}$  in. dia. by 13 in. long)
- 60 ft. small branches  
( $\frac{3}{8}$  in. to  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. dia.)

### HARDWARE

- 4 screws (3-in. #8 porch and deck)
- 200 nails  
( $1\frac{1}{8}$ -in. brad)
- 12 nails (2-in. brad)
- 4 furniture glides  
( $\frac{1}{8}$  in.)

# Cut and attach the legs

Don't worry if the legs are a bit shaky at this point. You'll strengthen them and make the base more rigid when you add stretchers later.



**Handsaw gets the job done.** Use a branch or a slender sapling for the legs.



**Screw the legs in place.** Clamp the top to sawhorses. The sawhorses also support the legs as you screw them in place.



**Paint the plywood top.** Spray paint works best. Use a piece of cardboard to shield the legs from overspray. Also, put masking tape around the tops of each leg for extra protection.

be done on a tablesaw, with a handheld circular saw, or even with a handsaw. Regardless of the tool you use, make sure you cut it square.

Now use a handsaw to cut the legs to length. I cut the four legs for this table from a single sapling. The slight variation in thickness makes very little difference in the finished work.

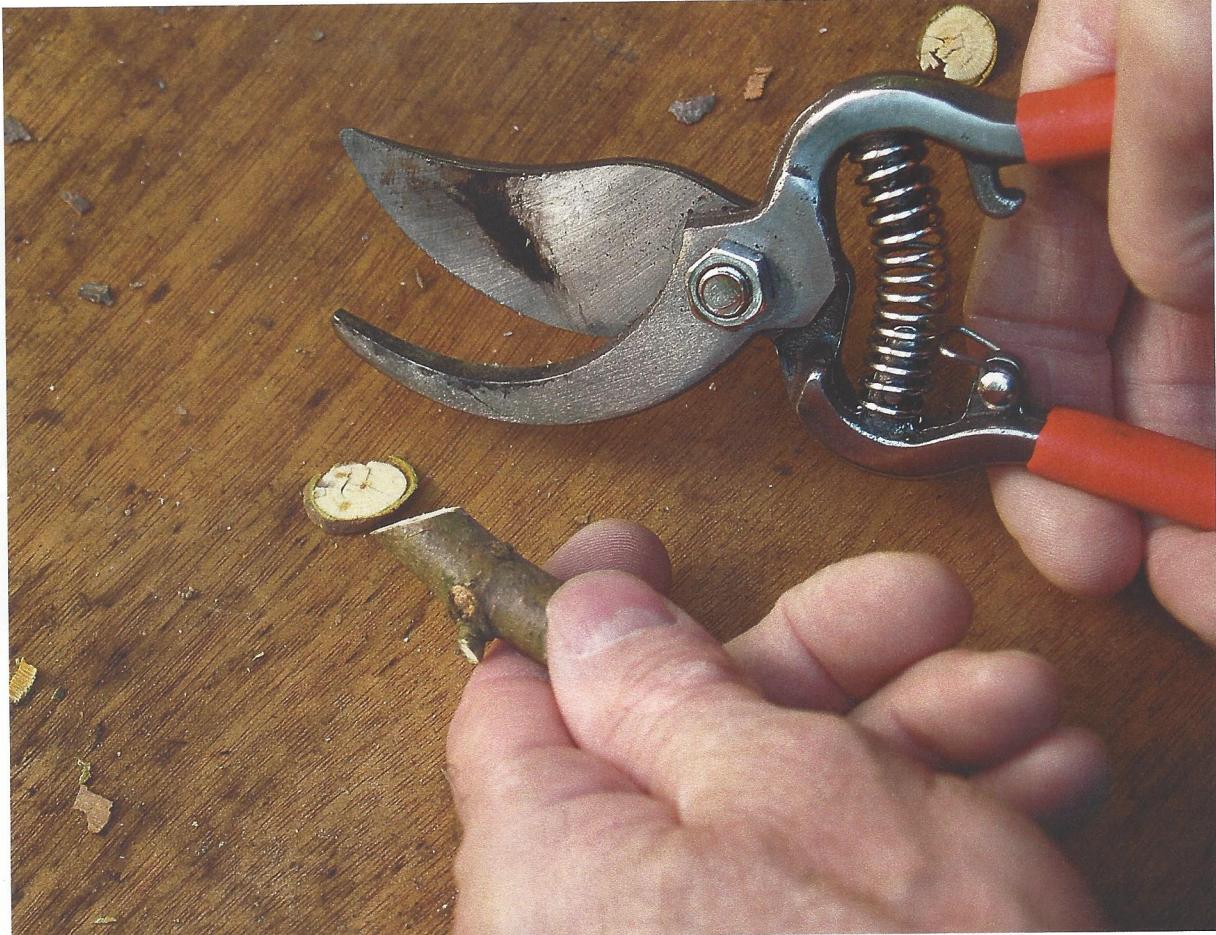
After you have cut the legs to length, attach the tabletop with screws, one in each leg. Clamping the top to a sawhorse will help you to hold the legs tight while you drive the screws in place. I use  $2\frac{1}{2}$ -in.-long exterior deck screws to secure the legs.

Paint the plywood top with black spray paint. The black paint will make the top nearly invisible if seen through the sticks. Use

# Frame the top

Covering the plywood top's edge is a small detail, but it's necessary to complete the rustic look. Without it, the table would seem factory made.

**Use pruning shears to cut the ends. A final trimming cut following a rough cut will give a smoother surface.**



**Nail the branches in place with an air gun.** Stowe uses 1 $\frac{3}{16}$ -in.-long nails and is careful to keep his fingers at least a nail's distance from the nailing point.

## TIP

### WORK SMART

You will find that freshly cut "green" material will be much easier to work with than dry wood. When wood dries, the cell walls harden, making it harder to cut and harder to bend or nail.

masking tape and a piece of cardboard to protect the legs as you paint. You don't want any black paint on them.

### Create the mosaic top

I use small branches to completely cover the plywood top and edges. On this table, it is OK if the top isn't perfectly smooth. I try to secure the pieces together tightly to minimize the space in between. If you don't have a nail gun, you can use a hammer, but you will need to drill pilot holes to avoid splitting. Fresh-cut wood will be easier to cut, more flexible to bend into shape, and less likely to split as it is nailed.

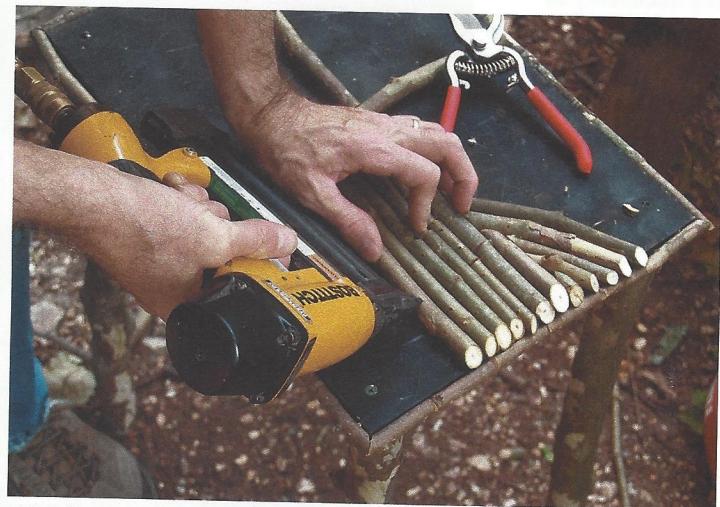
Carefully trim the branches to fit using pruning shears. If your branches are irregular in shape, you can make things easier by cutting them in short pieces laid end to end. Cover the edges with thin branches. I cut miters where the branches meet in the

# Create the mosaic top



**Short pieces can be nailed through the end as you fill in the corners.** Make sure to angle the nailer inward so that the nails reach the plywood.

**Start the pattern.** Begin creating a random mosaic by nailing down longer branches first. Carefully angle the nail gun so that the nails don't pass through the underside of the plywood.



**Fill it in.** Use shorter sticks between the longer ones, still angling the nails.



## TIP

### WORK SMART

Two cuts are better than one. Cut branches just a bit long and then make a second cut. The second, removing just a small amount of material, will give a cleaner cut and a more refined and accurate look to the finished table.

corners and then use a nail gun to attach the branches in place. Pay close attention to the placement of your fingers to avoid accidents. They should be at least a nail's length from the tip of the gun at all times.

On the top, place branches in a random pattern, first dividing the top into sections, then filling the sections by adding one piece after another. I cut the ends at the angles required to fit tight to adjoining stock. Use the nail gun at an angle so the nails won't

poke through the other side. Again, check where your fingers are with each shot to avoid accidents.

Gradually fill the space on the top, stick by stick. I arrange pieces so that I get a pattern of chamfered tips around the perimeter of the top. This gives a more uniform look to the edge, so it looks more consistent from a variety of angles, and I like the pattern it creates. Cut pieces to fill the corners, too. There is no exact pattern to follow. Just cut and fill until the entire top is covered.

# Add stretchers to strengthen the legs



**Pop, pop, and you're done.** Use two or more nails from various angles through each stretcher and into the legs. If you bring it indoors during ice and snow season, this table will give years of service.

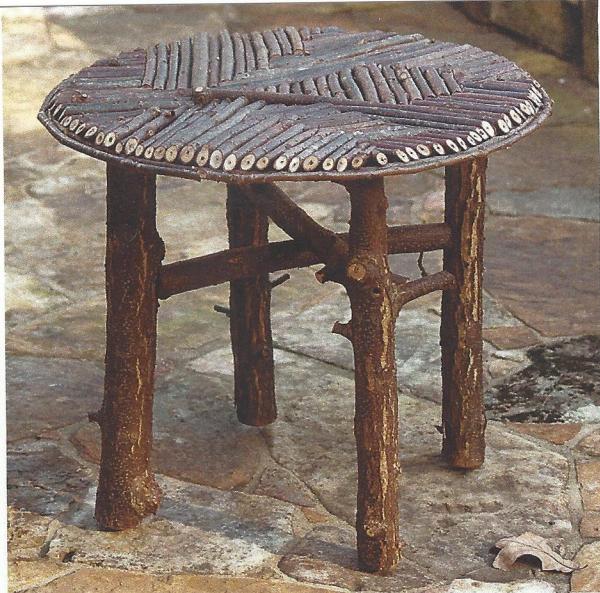
Even very short pieces can be used. Use the tip of the nail gun to hold them as you nail them in place.

## Add stretchers to the legs

Strengthen the legs on the table by adding stretchers to the outside. These parts are required to make the table stable and strong. I use branches slightly thicker than the material for the mosaic pattern. Nails are sufficient to hold them securely in place. If

you don't have a nail gun available, use screws so you can avoid hammering on the legs, as that could weaken the joints rather than make them strong. Choose your nail length by adding the thicknesses of the leg and the stretcher together. The nail should be just shorter than that length.

Cut the branches to a length equal to the width and depth of the table. I angle the cuts slightly so they don't stick out too far at the corners.

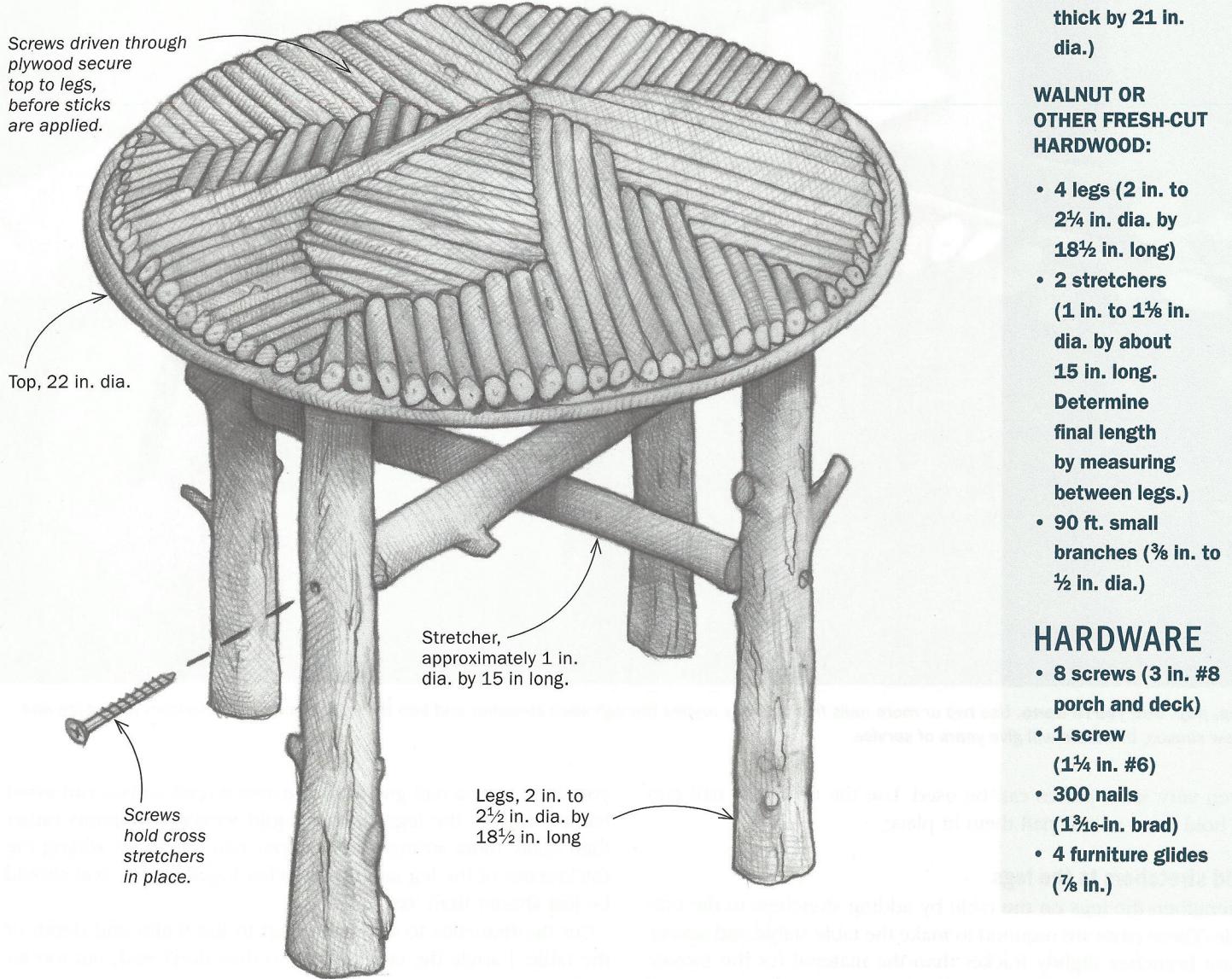


## A round version

Round tables are a bit more appealing than square ones. This one is made with green walnut sticks and branches. Putting the branch edge on the round top requires that you use material that is fresh cut and flexible in order to bend it to shape without breaking.

### Round stick-and-branch table

Overlapping stretchers beneath the top make for a very strong base, while freshly cut walnut can easily bend around the perimeter of the top.



### What you'll need

#### MATERIALS

##### BALTIC-BIRCH PLYWOOD

- One top (½ in. thick by 21 in. dia.)

##### WALNUT OR OTHER FRESH-CUT HARDWOOD:

- 4 legs (2 in. to 2½ in. dia. by 18½ in. long)
- 2 stretchers (1 in. to 1½ in. dia. by about 15 in. long. Determine final length by measuring between legs.)
- 90 ft. small branches (¾ in. to ½ in. dia.)

#### HARDWARE

- 8 screws (3 in. #8 porch and deck)
- 1 screw (1¼ in. #6)
- 300 nails (1¾-in. brad)
- 4 furniture glides (⅜ in.)



**Notch the second stretchers.** Use a knife to cut the notch. This small joint increases the base's strength.



**Predrill, countersink, and screw the legs to the cross-stretchers.** The  $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. countersunk hole is just the right size for a dowel plug.



**Screw the stretchers together.** Working from beneath the stretchers, drill and countersink a pilot hole where they intersect, then screw them together.

Use the nail gun to attach the stretchers to the legs. I use two or more nails to attach each end and angle each nail differently to provide additional resistance to pulling out.

### The round table has crossing stretchers

The techniques for making the round version of this table are the same as those used for the square table, with one exception: the stretchers. On the round table, the stretchers are not nailed to the outside of the legs. Instead, they cross over one another between the legs.

To make the stretchers, first measure the distance between opposite legs and cut the branches to that length. Use countersunk wood screws to hold the first stretcher in place, screwing from the outside of the leg into the stretcher's end.

Before installing the second cross-stretcher, carve a small notch where the two intersect. This will allow the cross-stretchers to be screwed securely to each other.

After screwing the second stretcher to the legs, screw the stretchers together from underneath. Drill a pilot hole and select the length of the screw so that it won't go all the way through both pieces of stock. This way, the screw won't be visible. □

Doug Stowe is a furniture maker in Eureka Springs, Ark., and has written numerous articles and books on woodworking. This article is adapted from his book *Rustic Furniture Basics* (2009, The Taunton Press).



**Finish the top.** Arrange sticks in a pattern and nail them in place on the top.