

Gazing up at a tree in full leaf, hiding behind a leafy bush, crunching through autumn leaves... the leaves all around us inspire children's play and imagination. These sensory leaf tiles build on children's knowledge of the natural world by encouraging them to observe closely the different shapes, sizes and patterns within leaves. Made from wood, the tiles are both tactile and open-ended, ideal for use alongside other natural materials.

Useful vocabulary

- Oak, birch, aspen, maple, sweet chestnut, beech
- Stem, vein, tip, lobes
- Wide, long, thin, curved, pointed, jagged, smooth
- Similar, different, same, identical
- Deciduous, evergreen

Leaf pairs

Use the tiles to play a Pelmanism matching game. Paying close attention in order to notice small differences is a pre-reading skill, as it prepares children to spot differences between letter shapes:

- Turn all the tiles face down on a flat surface and mix them. To make the game easier for younger children, you can use fewer tiles (such as four pairs) or arrange the tiles in a grid layout. Laying the tiles in a random arrangement will increase the challenge.
- The first player turns over two tiles – if they show the same leaf, the player keeps the matching pair. If they are different, turn them back over in the same place as before, encouraging children to remember what they were.
- Take turns to turn two tiles over, encouraging children to wait patiently for their own turn.
- Continue until all the pairs have been discovered, then count how many tiles each player has – the winner has the most tiles.

More tile games

- Snap: Two players each have a pile of tiles turned face down. Take turns to turn over the top tile and place it face up, creating a new pile each. If the top tiles on both players' piles are a matching pair, the first player to shout, 'Snap!' wins the pair. Continue until all the pairs have been found, turning the pile of face-up tiles over to reuse when the face-down pile is finished.
- Matching leaves: Find some real leaves that are the same varieties as some of the leaves shown on the tiles. Place these in a bag and put the tiles face-up on a surface. Ask a child to pull a leaf out of the bag and look for a tile showing the same variety of leaf. This may generate some discussion due to the natural variation in individual leaves.
- For a sensory challenge, place two tiles face up and in the same orientation under a cloth so they can't be seen. Ask a child to put their hands under the cloth and feel the two tiles. (Alternatively, you could ask them to close their eyes or use a blindfold.) Do the two tiles feel the same or different?



Leaf talk

Talk about the leaf tiles to build on children's existing knowledge of the natural world:

- What do the children notice about the shape of the leaves? What do the leaf shapes feel like? Looking at two tiles, such as the aspen and sweet chestnut leaves, which leaf has a long, thin shape? Which leaf has a pointed tip, the birch or the oak? Which has more veins, the beech or the maple?
- Do the children know what happens to some leaves in the autumn? What colours do they turn? When do new leaves grow? Are there some trees that keep their leaves all year round?
- All the leaves shown on the tiles are from deciduous trees. In the autumn collect leaves from the ground and see how many of these varieties you can find.
- Talk about trees using their leaves to collect sunlight in order to make food.



Leaf detectives

- Create a leaf investigation area on a table or tray: include the tiles and some real leaves, as well as sticks, pine cones and other tree seeds. Provide magnifying glasses and paper for children to observe and record what they see. Books and posters will encourage children to find out more, and baskets will be useful to sorting the items.
- An autumn nature walk is a great opportunity for children to collect leaves from the ground. Use the tiles to help identify the leaves and record your finds.
- The tiles are ideal for taking rubbings, using a wax crayon and paper. As well as promoting fine motor skills, children learn about how much pressure to apply to create the clearest rubbing possible. Children could cut their rubbings out and stick them onto the outline of a tree.



Leaf play

The tiles can be added to various play areas for children to explore:

- Use the tiles with play dough to encourage children to make leaf imprints. Learning how much pressure to apply to get a good imprint promotes hand-eye co-ordination and fine muscle development. You could also play a game where an adult makes an imprint and the child finds the matching tile.
- Add the tiles to treasure baskets full of natural materials such as sticks, pine cones, acorns, feathers, shells, pebbles and fabric.
- Use the tiles in a collection of various loose parts (such as felt, ribbons, string, cardboard, plant pots, egg cartons, sticks or pasta shapes), for children to build or create with, going wherever their imagination leads.
- Create a woodland small-world play tray, adding the leaf tiles to grass (real or artificial), real leaves, sticks, stones and woodland animal figures.



Books about leaves

We're Going on a Leaf Hunt by Steve Metzger

The Leaf Thief by Alice Hemming

Leaf Man by Lois Ehlert