Chapter 15—Weaving and Dyeing Materials

Description of the Product and Its Uses

A great variety of native materials that may grow in or near native forests and woodlands can be used for weaving, decorating, or dyeing. While there are few examples of use of forest products for these applications on a commercial scale, a renewed appreciation of the potential for these products could be part of a broader focus of a rural area on weaving, dyeing, and related craft skills.

The predominant basketmaking material in the eastern half of the United States has historically been splints or splits from ash and eastern white oak trees. In addition to ash and oak, woods from maple, sassafras, spruce, aspen, and pine are commonly used. (In Sweden, pine is the preferred basketmaking material.) Apart from wood, a great many forest products can be used to weave. In the Pacific Northwest’s rich basketry tradition, cedar bark, willow, and beargrass was primarily used. Some Northwest Indian tribes, such as the Makah and Lummi, still practice basketry with these materials (table 15–1).

Table 15–1. Forest products commonly used in weaving and dyeing materials

| Alder bark   | Oregon grape roots |
| Beargrass   | Tan oak           |
| Black or brown ash | White oak     |
| Douglas-fir | White birch bark |
| Hemlock     | Willow            |
| Lichens     | Yellowbark roots |
| Oak wood and bark |           |

Willow bark from birch, hickory, and poplar; vines from bittersweet, honeysuckle, and virginia creeper; leaves and grasses of cattails, rushes, sedges, and sweetgrass; roots of spruces, pines, and tamarack; leaf stalks of sumac; and needles of white, Ponderosa, and longleaf pine are also all popular weaving materials for natural basketry.

A great many native North American plants can be used for dyeing. A few examples of those that are found in forests include the following:

- Alder (*Alnus tenuifolia*)
- Alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*)
- Arrowleaf Senecio (*Senecio triangularis*)
- Asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*)
- Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*)
- Aster, Purple (*Aster spp.*)
- Aster, White (*Aster porteri* Gray)
- Bee Plant (*Cleome serrulata*)
- Bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis*)
- Bitterbrush (*Purshia tridentata*)
- Black Medic (*Medicago lupulina*)
- Black Walnut (*Juglans nigra*)
- Black-Eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia* spp.)
- Blazing-Star (*Liatis* spp.)
- Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*)
- Bluebell (*Mertensia ciliata*)
- Blueberry (*Vaccinium* spp.)
- Blue-Flowered Lettuce (*Lactuca pulchella*)
- Bracken Fern (*Pteridium aquilinum*)
- Bulrush (*Scirpus acutus*)
- Burdock (*Arctium minus*)
- Butter-and-Eggs (*Linaria vulgaris Hill*)
- Buttercup (*Ranunculus acris*)
- California Laurel (*Umbellularia Californica*)
- Cattail (*Typha latifolia*)
- Chicory (*Cichorium intybus*)
- Chokecherry (*Prunus melanocarpa*)
- Cinquefoil (*Potentilla* spp.)
- Clematis, White (*Clematis ligusticifolia*)
- Cocklebur (*Xanthium italicum*)
- Common Horehound (*Malva neglecta* L.)
- Common Mallow: see *Malva*
- Cottonwood (*Populus* spp.)
- Cow Parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum*)
- Creeping Harebell (*Campanula rapunculoides*)
- Crownvetch (*Coronilla varia*)
- Curly Dock (*Rumex crispus*)
- Currant (*Ribes* spp.)
- Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)
- Dodder (*Cuscuta* spp.)
- Dogbane (*Apocynum cannabinum*)
- Evening Primrose (*Oenothera biennis*)
- Eveningstar (*Mentzelia decapetala*)
- False Lupine (*Thermopsis montana*)
- Fireweed (*Epilobium angustifolium*)
- Gaillardia (*Gaillardia aristata*)
- Golden Wooly Aster (*Chrysopsis villosa*)
- Goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.)
Indian Paintbrush (Castilleja miniata)
Horsemint (Monarda menthaefolia Benth)
Horse-tail (Centauraea repens)
Kochia (Kochia scoparia)
Ladies' Bedstraw (Galium boreale)
Ladysthumb (Polygonum aviculare)
Leafy Spurge (Euphorbia esula)
Madrone (Arbutus menziesii)
Manzanita (Arctostaphylos columbiana)
Marshelder (Iva xanthifolia)
Matchbrush (Gutierrezia sarothrae)
Matweed (Polygonum aviculare)
Milkweed (Asclepias spicosa)
Miner's Candle (Cryptantha virgata)
Mormon Tea (Ephedra viridis)
Mountain Mahogany (Cercocarpus montanus)
Mullein (Verbascum thapsus)
Oak Galls
Osage Orange (Maclura pomifera)
Peppermint (Mentha piperita)
Plantain (Plantago)
Ponderosa Pine (Pinus ponderosa)
Povertyweed (Ambrosia tomentosa)
Prickly Lettuce (Lactuca scariola)
Prostrate Knotweed: see Matweed
Purslane (Portulaca oleracea)
Rabbitbrush (Chrysothamnus spp.)
Ragweed, Common (Ambrosia spp.)
Ragweed, Giant (Ambrosia trifida)
Redroot Pigweed (Amaranthus retroflexus)
Rough Pigweed: see Redroot Pigweed
Russian Thistle (Salsola kali)
Sage (Artemisia frigida)
Sagebrush (Artemisia tridentata)
Salsify (Tragopogon pratensis)
Scouring Rush (Equisetum arvense)
Scouring Pea (Psoralea tenuifolia)
Sedge (Carex spp.)
Showy Daisy (Erigeron speciosus)
Snakeweed: see Scouring Rush
Snow-on-the-Mountain (Euphorbia marginata)
Soapwort (Saponaria officinalis)
Sow-Thistle (Sonchus oleraceus)

Even noxious weeds that may invade disturbed areas, such as bindweed (Convolvulus arvensis), have dye uses.

Materials for basketry can best be described by understanding the four basic types of basketry—splint, coiled, twined, and wicker basketry.

**Splint basketry** uses thin, flexible strips of wood, flat reed, cane, or bark. However, native woods and barks are considered by many basketmakers to be superior to reed and cane, which are products of the rattan palm and are imported materials.

Native trees that have been used for making splints are black ash (also called brown or water ash) and white ash, white oak, basket oak, white maple (swamp maple), northern white cedar, buckeye, hickory, poplar, elm, box elder, birch, and cypress. Barks used for making splints include birch bark, elm bark, smooth willow bark, smooth basswood bark, and the inner bark of hickory, white pine, and hemlock.

Ash splint basketry is the primary native basketry of the Northeast and Midwest. Black ash (called brown ash in New England) is one of the best materials for plaited basketry because it is among the easiest to make into splints and it will bend without cracking or breaking. It can be found from the southern border of New York State up to the Great Lakes and around the Great Lakes (including Wisconsin). Black ash cannot readily be
planted and grows in wetlands and swamps in silty soil where many other trees do not grow. It is easily shaded out because it is not a large tree.

The ideal ash trees for making splints are 7 to 9 inches in diameter with at least a 6-foot section of trunk that is blemish free. Ash can be machine cut into splints or hand stripped into splints. Commercially made splints are good for weaving chair seats, but the best quality splint for basketmaking, whether of ash or any wood, are hand-split or pulled. The reason is that sawing cuts across the tree’s growth rings, whereas hand stripping preserves the integrity of the wood fibers within the growth rings, thereby giving the splints greater flexibility and strength.

Preparing weaving materials, such as ash splints, is very labor intensive. The wood must be pounded after the bark is removed, and the splints are made using a draw knife, knife, ax, or wooden mallet. Step-by-step instructions for preparing ash splints for weaving are available (see Scheider, 1972, or Hart, 1976). Courses in preparing traditionally split or peeled splints using ash are also available (for example, contact Martha Weatherbee Basket Shop, Sanbornton, New Hampshire).

White oak, another excellent tree for splint making is primarily found in a range that extends from the State of New York State west to the Mississippi, south to Kentucky, and east to the Carolinas. The ideal tree is 4 to 8 inches in diameter with straight ridges on the bark and with a straight midsection of 5 to 6 feet with no twigs or branches. Preparing white oak is an involved process using an ax, wedges, froes, and knives, but a basket made of white oak can last 70 years or more. Detailed information concerning the splinting of white oak can be found in “Handling White Oak” (Bennett, 1974) or “Basketry of the Appalachian Mountains” (Stephenson, 1977). Courses are available from Connie and Tom McColley, Chloe, West Virginia.

**Coiled basketry** uses a series of connected spirals or rings that are wrapped or stitched together. **Twined basketry** refers to twisting weaving material together. Both types of construction typically use narrow strips that can be closely spaced. Native materials such as grasses,rushes,split willow shoots,weeping willow branches,honeysuckle,cattail leaves, and thin ash and oak splints can be used. The inner bark of basswood and the roots of the red cedar have been favorite materials of Indians for making cordage and coiled baskets. Paper birch is especially suitable for baskets because the bark peels readily into long strips that are used for stitching material. Wild grape vine bark is used as core material for coiled baskets. Many imported commercial materials such as round reed, fiber rush, Hong Kong grass, raffia, ropes, cords, and fibers are also used.

**Wicker basketry** applies to any round, shootlike material used in woven construction. The most common materials used today are round reed (an imported material) and willow. Red osier dogwood, grapevine, and any number of roots, barks, shoots, vines, and runners are all possibilities. Procedures for preparing willow branches are available (see TerBeest, 1985, or Hart, 1976).

Other woven items include chair bottoms, mats, and a great many decorative items that can be made from the same materials and use similar weaving techniques as those for basketmaking.

**Market and Competition Considerations**

Baskets made from ash and oak represent the major woven product made from native forest materials with sales that approach a level that could be considered an industry. Other native materials are used primarily by hobbyists in volumes that are relatively small. There is no commercial source of hand-split white oak, although thin strips of sawed and processed white oak can be obtained from some supply houses. However, it is doubtful that a rural entrepreneur could make a living gathering and preparing a material such as white oak splints for sale to buyers for weaving supplies. To sell competitively, it is necessary to produce repetitively, which requires dealing with materials that are standardized and can be obtained in volume. However, the process of finding and preparing splints is not standardized and is very labor intensive. Because of this, and because the cost of labor is so much cheaper in the Orient, native materials such as ash and oak splints are several times the price of cane and reed, which are...
imported. A $10 reed basket made from oak or ash will cost $30 or $40.

Consequently, most baskets made for any kind of mass production are made out of cane and reed, and these materials account for about 75 percent of the materials sold by the supply houses. Nonetheless, most craftspeople who stay in basketmaking for 3 or 4 years eventually switch to native materials because they are more enjoyable to use and the baskets last much longer. Reed becomes brittle and breaks up after 10 years, while ash and oak stay hard but not brittle.

There is a national market for high-quality art and handcrafted objects from weaving materials. However, there are few local markets. Creating local or regional markets requires educated consumers to appreciate and value the quality and uniqueness of woven products made from native materials.

Those wishing to get into basket supplies and basketmaking should do it because they love it, for it is not an easy industry in which to make a living. When she started years ago, my wife worked for 8 years, 12 hours a day, 7 days a week before netting $5,000 for a 12-month period. But we made it, and today we are one of, if not the largest shop, specializing in early American baskets.

(Nathan Taylor, Martha Weatherbee Basket Shop)

Distribution

Each region of the country has its own market for weaving and basketry materials, and most people purchase their materials from supply houses that buy and sell basketry and other weaving materials. There are a half dozen wholesale buyers in the Nation who buy and sell basketry materials, primarily through catalogs. Most of these also operate a retail store. There are probably another half dozen stores that specialize in selling basketmaking materials but do not have catalogs. If a particular product is desired, the supply house will try to locate it. Otherwise, those with materials to sell generally contact the supply house rather than vice versa. A number of catalogs and publications advertise the suppliers (see Contributors).

Resource Conservation Considerations

It would not appear that the level of harvesting of forest products for weaving materials would be great enough, at least in the foreseeable future, to damage the resource. Of course, with a sudden wave of popularity in a very special material, such as cedar or spruce roots, it would be possible to damage isolated trees.

Profile

Tom and Connie McColley of Chloe, West Virginia, are self-taught basketmakers and teachers who have been making baskets for 15 years, specializing in white oak but also using honeysuckle, hickory bark, and a variety of other natural materials. They have taught their basket-making techniques throughout the Eastern United States, especially in Tennessee and West Virginia. Together they have pioneered a new system for producing large, abstract, urn-shaped baskets that have elevated their work to high artistic form.

Tom McColley scours the countryside for the desired white oak trees, since the tree must be chosen with great care if it is to have the necessary characteristics to make splints. He tries to do his searching on large tracts, over 100 acres, and the forests where he looks are usually privately owned lands. Landowner permission is always sought first. The ideal trees are small (from 4 to 9 inches in diameter) and very straight.

While Tom always offers to pay for any trees he finds, since West Virginia is “tree rich” and because the trees he is interested in are small, he has never actually had a landowner ask to be paid for any of the trees he has harvested for baskets. But Tom pays for the trees in his own currency—if he harvests several trees from one landowner, he makes a basket for them.

The McColleys cut and use about 15 trees a year. The work involved in preparing the splints from the tree must be completed within 2 to 3 weeks of cutting the tree. The preparation of the splints is extremely labor intensive and really constitutes two-thirds of the basketmaking process. After the tree has been cut, it is hand split, first using wedges and different sizes of froes, and eventually using hands alone to pull the wood apart. The goal is to take the fibers off the tree exactly in the way in which they grew, in the thickness of one growth ring. Because the weaving material is so thin, it must be very flexible and very strong. Splitting across the growth rings creates a weakness.

Baskets woven from handmade native materials are able to command a much higher price than those made from machine-produced splints that are available from basket supply shops. The baskets produced by the McColleys are sold primarily to collectors. Their baskets sell for between $65 and $3,500. The McColleys mainly market their baskets through two carefully selected craft shows on the East Coast a year and also through gallery displays.

The McColleys are relatively unusual in that their income and that of one part-time employee are completely derived from basketmaking. A key factor in their success as a business has been that, in addition to making
baskets, the McColleys teach basketmaking. About half of their annual income comes from producing baskets and half from teaching. They offer 5-day courses in basketmaking six times a year during the summer months. The tuition cost is $250. Attendees can also get room and board for the 5 days for an additional $140. The courses take up to 10 participants and in 1991 they were 90 percent filled. Most of the attendees are hobbyists. Only about 20 percent are professional or semiprofessional basket weavers. The entire process, from selecting the tree to making the baskets, is covered in the course.

In contrast to the McColleys, most basketmakers today use reed and cane, which are readily available imported materials that are considerably less expensive than native wood splint materials. But there is a growing interest in learning to use native North American materials for weaving. Many of those who come to the McColleys’ course do so to experience working with white oak and other natural native materials. Many even come from areas where there is no white oak, such as in the Western States. The McColleys are thinking of providing hand-split white oak to a selected supply house if this proves economically feasible.

There is a lot of demand both for traditional baskets (which are lower in price) and top of the line art basketry. But it is a lot of hard work. Also, you must constantly educate your buyers to understand what is different about baskets made from native materials compared to the baskets made from imported reed. But we have made a living out of it.

Even when we were producing very traditional, functional work, 90 percent of our baskets were never used as serviceable containers. They are used as art and decorative objects.

(Tom McColley)

**Considerations for a Rural Development Strategy**

There would appear to be very limited opportunity for generating income by harvesting forest products for weaving materials, since the materials themselves have limited market value. Even the largest basketmakers in the country are seldom larger than a family operation and may have only three employees.

The value must be added to the materials, either by turning them into marketable products or by capturing the educational, human interest, and tourism potential of the process itself. Based on the increasing interest in reviving old crafts, basketry and related crafts could be valuable components of a broader “folk art” strategy for a forest-based community.

One realistic rural economic development strategy for a rural forest-dependent community and region to pursue would be to develop an area’s folk art—not just weaving but a number of skills and products related to forest products, lore, tradition, and handcrafts. A community undertaking such a strategy would encourage those who have unique skills to use them to harvest local materials, make authentic and high-quality products, and market them to audiences in the United States and abroad who can appreciate the historical and cultural linkages being developed. A further component of this strategy would be to teach the skills and supply others with the unique local materials used.

A range of different products made from local woods would be necessary. The skills would be demonstrated and taught, and the products would be sold in local markets and in nonlocal markets through a unique catalog. Innovation would be necessary in order to nail down the market, of course.

It seems to me that if you’re going to make a living on a small scale from the woods, you would do it today the way it has been traditionally done—and that is to be a craftsman of simple folk art.

(Nathan Taylor, Martha Weatherbee Basket Shop)

**Contributors**

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Robert McKnight, Day Basket Company, 110 West High Street, North East, MD 21901. 301–287–6100.

K. C. Parkinson, Connecticut Cane and Reed Company, 134 Pine Street, Box 762, Manchester, CT 06040. 203–646–6586.

Jim Rutherford, *Basket Bits*, P.O. Box 8, Loudonville, OH 44842.


Nathan Taylor, Martha Weatherbee Basket Shop, NCR 69, Box 116, Sanbornton, NH 03269. 603–286–8927.

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Bennett, Jim. 1974. Handling white oak. Deer Track Crafts, 8215 Beeman Road, Chelsea, MI 48118.


Mulford, Judy. 1986. Basic pine needle basketry, 2098 Mandeville Canyon Road, Los Angeles, CA 90049.


TerBeest, Char. 1985. Wisconsin willow—adventures of a basketmaker. Wild Willow Press, P.O. Box 438, Baraboo, WI 53913.

TerBeest, Char. 1988. Gifts from the earth—a basketmaker's field guide to midwest botanicals (700 Second Street, Baraboo, WI 53913, 608–356–9048). Wild Willow Press, P.O. Box 438, Baraboo, WI.


**Newsletters**


The Craft Report lists the craft shows.

Basket Bits, P.O. Box 8, Loudinville, OH 44642. $4 per back issue.

Martha Weatherbee Basket Shop News, NCR 69, Box 116, Sanbornton, NH 03269, 3 per year—$10.

**Resources**

Chereen La Plantz, Press De La Plantz, P.O. Box 220, Bayside, CA 95524. Knowledgeable about many native materials for weaving.

Oz the Stick Man, 8958 Geiser Road, Holland, OH 43528. 419–865–6698.

Royal Wood Ltd., 517 Woodville Road, Mansfield, Ohio. 419–526–1630.

**Publications for the Professional Craftsperson**


Specialists in Native Materials

Brown Ash

Adirondack Seat Weavers, R.D. 1, Box 177A, Fonda, NY 12068. 518–829–7241.

Day Basket Company, 110 West High Street, North East, MD 21901. 301–287–6100.

Jonathan Kline, 5066 Mott Evans Road, Trumansburg, NY 14886. 607–387–5718.

Martha Weatherbee Basket Shop, Eastman Hill Road, HRC 69, Box 116, Sanbornton, NH 03269–0116. 603–286–8927.

White Ash


Elizabeth and Hugh Wilson, Wilson’s Splints, P.O. Box 51, Paint Lick, KY 40461. 606-925-2195.

White Oak

Appalachian

Kathleen Dalton, Coker Creek, Route 2, Box 220—Coker Creek, Tellico Plains, TN 37385. 615–261–2157.


Richard Spicer, Poplin Hollow, Route 3, Box 146, Linden, TN 37096. 615–589–5126.

Hand-Drawn Splints

Day Basket Company, 110 West High Street, North East, MD 21901. 301–287–6100.

Ozarks


Willow


Sandy Whalen, Whale–Inn Farms, 880 Moore Road, Milford, MI 48042. 313–685–2459.

Cedar Bark/Beargrass


Sweet Grass


Basketry Guilds

Arizona

Basket Artisans of Arizona, c/o Kathy Lewis, 7633 North 22nd, Phoenix, AZ 85020.

California

Bay Area Basket Makers Guild, c/o Susan Correia, 3624 Lorena Avenue, Castro Valley, CA 94546.

Los Angeles Basketry Guild, c/o Judy Mulford, 2098 Mandeville Cyn Road, Los Angeles, CA 90049.

Connecticut

Northeast Basketmakers Guild, c/o Pat Congdon, 430 Ridgewood Road, Middleton, CT 06457.

Florida

Florida Association of Basketmakers, c/o Jill J. Boles, One 120 Egan Drive, Orlando, FL 32822.

Venetian Society of Basketmakers, P.O. Box 1411, Venice, FL 34284–1411.

Georgia

Basketweavers Guild of Georgia, Bulloch Hall, P.O. Box 1309, Roswell, GA 30077.

Gwinnett Basketmakers Guild, c/o Martha Moon, 2212 Valley Creek Circle, Snellville, GA 30278.

Illinois

The Basketry Arts Guild, c/o Linda Simmons, 506 Northwest First Street, Galva, IL 61434.

Land of Lincoln Basketweavers Association, Route 1, 2962 East 13th Road, Ottawa, IL 61350.

Indiana

Fort Wayne Basketmakers Guild, c/o Margie Underwood, 4605 North 635 West, Huntington, IN 46750.

Loganland Basketmakers Guild, Ronda Brugh, Editor of Spoke X Spoke, Rural Route 4, Box 462, Rochester, IN 46975.
Sugar Creek Basket Weavers Guild, c/o Patti Henson, 954 Jonathan Drive, Plainfield, IN 46168.

Iowa
Amana Arts Guild, P.O. Box 114, Amana, IA 52203.
Iowa Basketweavers Guild, c/o Frances Wight, 602 West Buchanan, Winterset, IA 50273.

Maryland
Deer Creek Basketry Guild, P.O. Box 37, Pylesville, MD 21132.

Minnesota
Headwaters Basketmakers Guild, c/o Dianne Hegge, Route 3, Box 117, Fosston, MN 56542.

Missouri
Missouri Basket Weavers Guild, Laury Kremer, 2701 Peachwood Trail, St. Louis, MO 63129.

Nevada
Great Basin Basketmakers, c/o Mary Lee Fulkerson, 5055 Twin Springs Road, Palomino Valley, NV 89510.

New Jersey
New Jersey Basketweavers Guild, P.O. Box 224, Short Hills, NJ 07078.

New York
Westchester Area Basketmakers Guild, 316 Roaring Brook Road, Chappaqua, NY 10514.

North Carolina
North Carolina Basketmakers Association, P.O. Box 1626, Weaverville, NC 28787.

Ohio
Medina County Basket Weavers Guild, c/o The Wood Shed of Medina, 226 Washington Street, Medina, OH 44256.
Ohio Valley Basketmakers Guild, 1940 Gregory Lane, Cincinnati, OH 45206.
Western Reserve Basketry Guild, c/o Karen Sonderman, 4160 Darrow Road, Stow, OH 44224.
Wildwood Basketry Guild, Wildwood Cultural Center, 8500 Civic Center, Mentor, OH 44060.

Oregon
Columbia Basin Basketry Guild, P.O. Box 784, Oregon City, OR 97045.

Virginia
High Country Basketry Guild, P.O. Box 1143, Fairfax, VA 22030.

Washington
Northwest Basketweavers, Vi Phillips Basketry Guild, P.O. Box 5657, Lynnwood, WA 98048-5657.

Wisconsin
Prairie Basketry Guild of Wisconsin, c/o Barb Hantschel, 1355 Deane Boulevard, Racine, WI 53405.