

The Tradition Continues Through Baskets

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History

Basket making is one of the oldest crafts, if not the oldest. Primitive humans used limbs, leaves, and vines woven together to carry the necessities of life—nuts, fruits, and game. From these crude beginnings, different cultures have developed literally hundreds of styles of baskets. In many cases, the style of baskets depends on the availability of resources and plants suitable for basket construction.

In early times, baskets were a necessity. This was long before the days of metal containers. Metal and plastic containers, in many instances, have replaced baskets. But, because baskets are a part of our heritage, most of us have a fascination for them.

Kinds of baskets

Baskets are defined by the method of weaving; most baskets are of five types or a combination of two or more of these types.

Splint – uses a flat material for all or most of the construction.

Rib – uses a round rod to form the frame for weaving.

Wicker or rod – uses a round material of rods made of natural material such as vines.

Nantucket – a type of basket developed at Nantucket in the mid-1800s.

Coiling – a method of binding together a number of small fibers such as pine needles and binding the coils together to form the basket.

Materials

Any material that can be bent can be used in basket construction. Elizabeth Jenson in her book, *Baskets from Nature's Bounty*, lists 265 plants from which the leaves, bark, roots, or wood can be used in making baskets.

Most common basket materials today are:

• Rattan

Rattan, sometimes called reed, comes from the trailing palm of the Malaysian Islands. It is cut in the wild to desired length and allowed to dry. The outer bark and thorns are removed. The stock is then taken into the factories and machined. The inner bark becomes cane and the pith is machined into round rattan—ranging from very small (#000) to about the size of your finger (#12). They can be flat ($\frac{3}{16}$ - $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches), flat oval ($\frac{3}{16}$ - $\frac{5}{8}$ inches), and oval. This material is sold in craft stores and basket supply companies, usually as a hank or roll of 1 pound.

• Rush

Rush is the leaves and stems of such plants as cattails. The material is worked, and the wet leaves are twisted into a rope of various sizes. It can be purchased as sea grass or Hong-Kong grass.

• Wood splints

The most common is white oak, but other woods like hickory or maple are used. These materials were used by early pioneers to make baskets needed on the frontier. The Cadillac of baskets is made from white oak splints. Illustrations and descriptions of making splints are found in *Appalachian White Oak Basketmaking*, *Green Woodworking* and *Basketry of Appalachian Mountains*.

• Bark

The inner bark is used today for handles and decoration of the rims of baskets. Bark is harvested in the spring and early summer from hickory, poplar, maple, willow, and other trees. The outer bark is removed with a drawknife. The bark is scored with a knife to desired width and pulled off in strips.

• Others

Any materials that can be bent—weeds, tree branches, tulip leaves, and vines such as grape, honeysuckle, or berry—can be used to construct baskets. Nature has a bounty of these materials.

Uses of baskets today

Baskets are used today for many purposes. Baskets are used to decorate homes; to hold flowers for weddings, funerals, and hospital visits; to store personal hygiene items, such as soaps, shampoos, and bubble bath to give as gifts; and to make arrangements with candles and greenery for holiday festivities. Baskets are used at picnics and suppers to carry dishes and supplies in the summer months.

Baskets are still used today to display and sell vegetables, flowers, and fruits in markets.

Not only are baskets decorative and appealing, but their uses are infinite.

Trade or brand names are mentioned only for educational purposes. The West Virginia University Extension Service intends no endorsement nor implies discrimination to the exclusion of other products that also may be suitable.

References

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