

The Tradition Continues Through Baskets

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Objectives

- To gain a greater appreciation of the history of baskets.
- To gain an understanding of the evolution of baskets.
- To understand the importance of baskets in earlier times.
- To understand how baskets are constructed.
- To provide a reference for more information.

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 basket 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

Splint baskets

A splint basket is just what the name implies. A splint, which is a material $\frac{3}{16}$ - $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide, is woven to form the bottom on the basket. These splints are broken or bent to become the stakes to



Splint baskets (left to right)—Decorative basket using reed, sea grass, and hickory bark; small door knob basket using reed; round picnic basket woven with white oak splits; and crab apple basket using reed.

weave the sides of the basket. Splints and other materials are used to weave the sides. Many weaves and combination of weaves can be used in weaving either in a continuous pattern or a start-and-stop weave for each row. The variation in splint baskets is unlimited because of the different sizes, shapes, colors, materials, and weaving patterns.

Rib

The rib basket is the traditional basket of the Appalachian region. The basket uses a hoop that becomes the rim and a second hoop that becomes the handle.

In some rib baskets, such as a potato basket, a handle is not a part of the basket. Between these hoops, round rods of oak or reed are used to form the warp for the weaving. Use $\frac{3}{16}$ - $\frac{3}{8}$ inch flat or flat oval reed splints or oak for weavers. The most common rib basket is the called the Appalachian, egg, or rump basket.



Rib Appalachian baskets—(left) Woven with reed and (right) woven with white oak split by a Tennessee basket maker.

Wicker or rod baskets

Both names are used for a basket using round materials. Examples of natural round materials



Rod baskets (left to right)—Made with round reed, vines, and willow rods.

are willow or weeping willow. Rods can be made by splitting white oak and working these materials into rough, round rods. These rods can then be pulled through a hole in a metal plate to gain evenness. In the construction of the wicker or rod basket, rods are crossed in a

pattern in the bottom. The bottom is woven, the rods are bent upward, new ones are added, and the original rods are spread out as the basket is woven.

Nantucket basket

The Nantucket basket gets its name from its origin. In 1856 off the shore of Nantucket, the *Nantucket South Shoal*

Lightship served as a lighthouse.

The crew, between their chores of light-tending, began to fill in the long hours by weaving unique baskets that they

would then sell on the island. Therefore, the baskets came to be known as “Nantucket” or “lighthouse” basket.

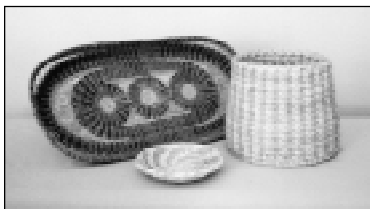
The Nantucket basket uses a wood bottom and a mold. The bottom has a groove sawed into it, and the stakes are placed in this groove. The weaving is continuous, usually using a narrow splint or cane. The bottom is fastened to the mold and the basket is woven to fit the mold. After weaving, the basket is removed from the mold and the handle and rim complete the basket. These baskets are well crafted and known worldwide. The Nantucket style basket uses a wooden base, but does not usually use a mold. Many of these baskets use wider stakes, and many use wider weavers with a start-and-stop weave pattern.



Two Nantucket style baskets using the wooden bottom and rattan for the stakes and weavers.

Coiling

A coiled basket is made of straw, grass, pine needles, or similar material that requires binding together a number of pieces to form the weave.



Coil baskets.

A coiled basket does not use stakes. On a pine needle basket, a number of needles are bound together with a binder. The

bound needles are bent around, and the binder is wrapped around to hold it in place. Needles are added to form a continuous weave. As the basket is woven, additional knots are added and additional binder is tied as the binder being used ends. The

needles are tapered for several inches at the completion of 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.

Construction materials vary from region to region. In southern areas, grass is used for basket making. In Appalachia, extensive use is made of white oak, hickory, and maple splints. In other areas, vines, or willow shoots are used.

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 necessary 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

As we can see, baskets were a necessity in earlier times to carry and store various materials.

Baskets are used today for these same purposes, but also 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.

Teaching

Teaching of the lesson can include the following:

- Discuss the sections in the leaflet
 1. history
 2. kinds of baskets
 3. materials
 4. uses of baskets
- Invite members to bring a favorite, unusual, or old basket or one they have made and tell about it.
- Invite a basket maker to attend and show his/her baskets and talk about basket construction.
- Use videotape *Splint Basket #1: The Construction of an Appalachian Basket*. The tape can be borrowed from the Dorsey Resource Center at WVU Jackson's Mill.
- Use videotape *Splint Basket #2: The Construction of a Splint Basket*. This tape is included in the Dorsey Resource Center library at WVU Jackson's Mill.
- Use videotape *Basketmaking in Colonial Williamsburg*. The tape can be borrowed from the Dorsey Resource Center at WVU Jackson's Mill.

References

Books

American Baskets to Weave by Grace Kabel, Plaid Enterprises, Inc., PO Box 7600, Norcross, GA 30091.

Appalachian White Oak Basket Making by Law and Taylor, University of Tennessee, PO Box 6525, Ithaca, NY 14850; 1-800-666-2211.

Basketry of Appalachian Mountains by Sue H. Stephenson, Prentice Hall Press, New York, NY.

Baskets and Basket Makers in Southern Appalachia by John Rice Irwin, Schiffer Publishing, Box E, Exton, PA 19341.

Baskets from Nature's Bounty by Elizabeth Jensen, Enterweave Press, 201 East Fourth Street. Loveland, CO 80537.

Earth Basketry by Osma Gallinger Tod, Schilter Publishing Company, 1469 Morstein Road, West Chester, PA 19380.

Egg Baskets to Weave by Nellann Roberts.

Green Woodworking by Drew Langsner, Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA.

The Basket Book by Lyn Siler, Sterling Publishing Company, Inc., New York, NY.

The Foxfire Book, Volume I edited by Eliot Wiggintown, Anchor Books, Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City, NY.

Willow, Oak and Rye by Jeannette Lasansby, Pennsylvania University Press, 215 Wagner Building, University Park, PA 16802.

Tapes

Basketmaking in Colonial Virginia
Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
AV Distribution Section
Box C
Williamsburg, VA 23187

Splint Basketry I
Appalachian Egg Basket
Victories Video Production
PO Box 1328
Port Townsend, WA 98368

Splint Basketry II
Staked and Pleated Basket
Victories Video Production
PO Box 1328
Port Townsend, WA 98368