



basketmaking



Techniques, left to right: plaited, coiled, stake & strand, looped and assembled.

Nativehands.co.uk

what is it?

It's creating containers by weaving plant fibres. Basketry is a tradition in every region of the world where plants grow, and the type of baskets will reflect the naturally-occurring plants in that region. The plant material needs to be long, strong and pliable. Willow fits that bill well in Europe.

Categories of basketry material

Stems: e.g. willow whips - the type of willow the whips usually come from is the osier.

Grasses (inc. straw), rush, reeds and long leaves: often made into pliable lengths by bundling together then coiling; can also be plaited together.

Wood: bark or split wood - commonly used are oak, ash, chestnut & hazel, used in the round or split. Often, coppiced material is used.

Categories of basketry techniques

Coiled: in the UK, this technique - most evident in the making of bee skeps - involves bundles of straw bound together (traditionally with split bramble). Coiled baskets are usually circular or oval, and can be made from any flexible fibres.

Plaited: there's a tradition of plaiting bulrushes to make baskets & floor matting; you can also plait with flat strips of bark or split wood

Stake & strand: essentially weaving a warp & weft; the warp is the 'skeleton' which the weft fleshes out. In the UK, willow is the main material for stake & strand, although there are many variations of materials and techniques

Looped: this involves a network of interlocking loops - like a string bag; the material used can include bast (inner bark of trees, often lime)

Assembled: pre-formed pieces fixed together - usually from split wood or bark, e.g. Sussex trug

These five techniques are found worldwide, depending on the local plants. There are many names for different styles of local baskets, often based on their function, for example those used historically in the fishing industry or in agriculture.

History

Basketmaking is an ancient craft. Twisted flax fibres, possibly for baskets, from 34,000 years ago were found in a cave in the Republic of Georgia. The first definite evidence of basketwork is from c. 12,000 years ago, but evidence is scant, as materials are perishable/flammable. But there have been finds in dry & boggy environments dating back to the Mesolithic period. Some of the earliest pottery fragments have basket marks on them. Some believe that pottery developed from baskets lined with clay and left next to the fire - the basket burned away, leaving a hard, clay pot. There's lots of evidence of basketwork since the Iron Age - both for vessels and for wattle panels for buildings, and of woven plant fibres generally, be it for baskets, hunting traps, shelter or textiles.

We're not the only (or first) species to make baskets - see the weaver bird, overleaf.

what are the benefits?

- More people are learning traditional skills, especially involving natural materials. There's a desire to connect with history and nature, as well as concerns over the use of plastics and oil-based products
- Baskets are biodegradable, but repairable. things are rarely repaired now, but baskets can last 100 years, and be repaired many times
- Baskets can be made from foraged hedgerow plants - so they'll be not only natural but free
- Other materials can be 'upcycled' into baskets, including plastic bags, wire, drinks cartons etc.
- Most people are losing connection with the cycle of production. By harvesting natural materials, and making useful objects, you can experience the entire production process and appreciate the value of resources
- It's a satisfying creative process, and although it can be technically demanding, it slows you down to the speed that the material demands, which can be very meditative



Weaver bird with nest.

what can I do?

Attend a course and get hands-on experience. Basketmaking isn't something you can learn easily from a book, although books can give you lots of ideas after you've mastered the basics. You don't need much kit to get started - just secateurs and a sharp craft knife. Then, as with most things, you need to do it a lot to get good at it, although almost everyone will make a functioning basket at their first attempt. Lots of companies sell willow & other materials, and when you learn with a basketmaker, they'll give you sources of materials; or you could just get into nature and see what you can find - experiment and see what works. In the UK the three main traditions are willow, rush and split wood basketry. But there are other suitable plants - if it's long, strong & flexible it's worth a try. You could use your new skills to make useful baskets for you and your family. Imagine foraging for berries or mushrooms with a beautiful basket you made yourself. This type would have a handle, and could also be used for shopping, picking apples or for picnics. Non-handled baskets are good for logs, laundry or harvesting potatoes. Oak swills (large, deep, no handle, made of split wood) can be used as cradles, and hats and even coffins can be made using basketry techniques. A tightly-made coiled basket could even hold liquids! If you enjoy it, you could think about trying to earn your living from baskets. Basketmaking has to be via small-scale production by the human hand - it can't be mechanised. Cheap imports from the Far East and eastern Europe have had a profound effect on the UK basketmaking industry, due to the low cost of labour in those parts of the world.

In the last decade there has been a resurgence of basketmaking in the UK - although less of an 'industry'. It's now more about contemporary basketmaking - more artistic, as well as functional - and more people are learning how to do it. Often, there used to be one or two basketmakers in a village, churning out the same baskets over and over again (and often these basketmakers were blind). This kind of production has declined drastically in the last 30 years, almost to the point of extinction, as it can't compete with baskets from overseas in terms of price. Contemporary basketmakers often augment their income by teaching or selling one-off pieces.

If you're serious about making a living from baskets, it might be an idea to get an apprenticeship with an established basketmaker. You can also obtain City & Guilds qualifications in the craft itself, with relevant business skills, and you may be able to get useful advice and information from the Heritage Crafts Association.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/basketmaking for more info, courses, links, products and books, including:
- B J Crawford, *Basketry Basics*
- Suzie Vaughan, *Handmade Baskets*
- Flo Hoppe, *Wicker Basketry*
- Osma Tod, *Earth Basketry*
- basketmakersassociation.org.uk - Basketmakers' Assoc.
- basketmakers.com - free patterns & tips
- wovencommunities.org - basketry history
- justpatterns.com - free downloadable patterns
- vannerie.com - inspirational site, lots of ideas



Coiled, multicoloured Mexican basket.

Feel free to upload, print and distribute this sheet as you see fit. 220+ topics on our website, each with introduction, books, courses, products, services, magazines, links, advice, articles, videos and tutorials. Let's build a sustainable, non-corporate system.

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