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Willow Spoke Baskets

by Travis Brown

Willow baskets are simple, practical containers that can hold anything from berries to flint blade blanks. Not only can the techniques discussed here be used to make willow baskets, but they can also be used to make a basket of any style or shape. Willow is a very valuable teacher. Once you have mastered these techniques with willow, you can use them with any material.

The first baskets that I ever made were of Black Willow. From that first experience with willow, my interest in weaving has branched to include all kinds of useful items. I have even found a few ways to make weaving a little easier. Through experimentation and attempts at creating replicas of native work, I have found little tricks that make weaving possible without three hands.

Black Willow, the species that I use most often, is a species that grows in almost all of the eastern United States. Many other species of willow, such as Weeping Willow, can be used. I've even seen green oak branches used for weaving. I enjoy experimenting with materials. As with bow-drill woods, one can spend a lifetime experimenting with weaving materials. The best weaving material that I have found are young willow shoots of about a pencil's diameter or slightly larger. These normally have light green, smooth bark. They often shoot up from a willow stump when it is cut, and sometimes even from willow logs that have been felled into a marshy area. They can be used throughout the year, and it should not be too hard to locate a patch of willows nearby. Also, willows grow quickly, and over-harvesting should not be too much of a problem. Just don't forget to say thank you.



THE SKELETON

The first step in making your basket is to gather an even number of shoots that are slightly larger and stiffer than those shoots with which you will use to weave. These need to be about three times in length as tall as your finished basket will be. I find that four of these, with an additional one, half the length of the others, works well for a basket big enough to fit a bowling ball in. The purpose of the odd shoot is to make the weaving work out right. These shoots are called the "warps," they are the backbone of your basket. If you have an even number of these "warp" shoots, then your

weaving will never work out right. You will be weaving in an over-under fashion here, and if you have an even number of warp shoots, then the pattern of your weaving will not alternate with each layer. In other words, you will weave over-under- over-under with each layer, rather than alternating with each layer, and your basket will fall apart. To start building your basket, take half of your long shoots in each hand. Lay them down perpendicular to each other at the middle like a big plus sign. Add the odd shoot to one of the sides.

SECURING THE SKELETON

Now, take a very small, flexible shoot or some cordage and either tie it onto a warp shoot or pinch it to the basket for now. Wrap this strand under the bottom group of shoots in your big plus sign and over the top group of shoots. For those of you who have made "God's eyes," this is what we want. If you were pinching on the end of your wrapping strand, then you should be able to wrap over the loose end. When you run out of wrapping material just tuck the end into the wrapping. You can wrap some more or go on to the next step.



THE RIM

The rim is the part of your basket that can take the frustration out of weaving. It is very possible to do this without putting on a rim first, but it can be very frustrating if shoots pop out where you do not want them to. Shoots do not bend the right way, and warp shoots break.

One of the best ways to make a primitive rim is done by bending a long shoot into a hoop and wrapping it around itself. This hoop will be the top circumference of your basket. Now wrap on several more shoots until you have a sturdy rim. This part is just like making a wreath if you've ever done that. The ends of the warp shoots are now bent upward and stuck between the wraps of the rim. Your basket should be beginning to shape up.

WEAVING

From here on out your basket may be woven with any type of weave, or a combination of weaves. The easiest weave is the old over-under weave. You simply tuck one end of a weaver or "weft" shoot into your bottom wrapping, and start weaving over-under around your basket. When you come to the end of a shoot, overlap a new shoot on the same path as the previous one for an under and an over; then continue weaving.



At the bottom of your basket, the turns that these warp shoots are required to make sometimes cause them to brake or split. Because of this, I use a very thin shoot or something else flexible. I find that retted Basswood or Poplar bark is great for this. It gets the bottom started well, and doesn't shrink like willow does when it dries, therefore, leaving the bottom of your basket very tight. This kind of bark can often be taken from broken limbs on which the bark

has separated and begun to rot. Soaking Basswood limbs in a pond can produce the same situation. Other materials that you could weave into your basket are Bulrushes, Cattails, Grasses, roots, Honeysuckle, Grapevine, or wooden splints.

FINISHING TOUCHES

Once you have woven up to your rim you will want to do something with those nasty warp ends sticking up. These can be cut off or tucked in. Just cutting these off works fine, but it leaves the possibility of the rim sliding off. To make a stronger basket, wrap or tuck these ends into the wrapping of your rim.

You may also want to add some protection to the shoots that make up your basket. The moisture contained in the green shoots we used to make our basket makes it sturdy and flexible. Over time, the shoots will dry out and shrink a little. This should not loosen your basket up too much. You can help your basket retain its strength by soaking it in vegetable oil or tallow. I have even sprayed baskets with Pam cooking spray.

These baskets can perform whatever function you need them for. They are not impossible to make, and what they have taught me has given me confidence to make things that I thought would be too complicated for me to do. With a good supply of shoots I can make a 2 gallon sized basket within an hour and a half. They are not only functional, but they can quickly leave you with a sense of accomplishment. No matter whether your basket is pack basket, a laundry basket, a creel basket, or foraging basket, it should serve you well, and even surprise you at times.



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