



*Produced by the Non-timber Forest Products Program at Virginia Tech in collaboration with:
USDA Forest Service, Southern Research Station, SRS-4702, Blacksburg, Virginia;
Top of the Ozarks Resource Conservation & Development, Inc., Houston, Missouri; &
Missouri Department of Conservation, Jefferson City, Missouri.*

Oakwood baskets

Most of us have used baskets at some point in our lives. Those of us who live in rural areas probably have used them more often than those of us who live in cities. Basketry dates back as early as 10,000 B.C. Evidence has been found that the Indians in New Mexico and Arizona were using baskets as molds for cooking pots as early as 5,000 B.C. Remnants of ancient basketry have been found in all parts of the world.

Prehistoric Native Americans used basketry in hundreds of ways, including dozens of traditional applications of baskets when handling food. Baskets have been used for gathering, carrying, storing, drying, milling, cooking, and serving food. Often, basketry was also used in hunting food, as in fish and game traps, hunting fences, and quivers made of basketwork.

A variety of materials have been used in basketry. Some of the predominant materials are wood splints, willow branches, vines, and blackberry or raspberry canes.

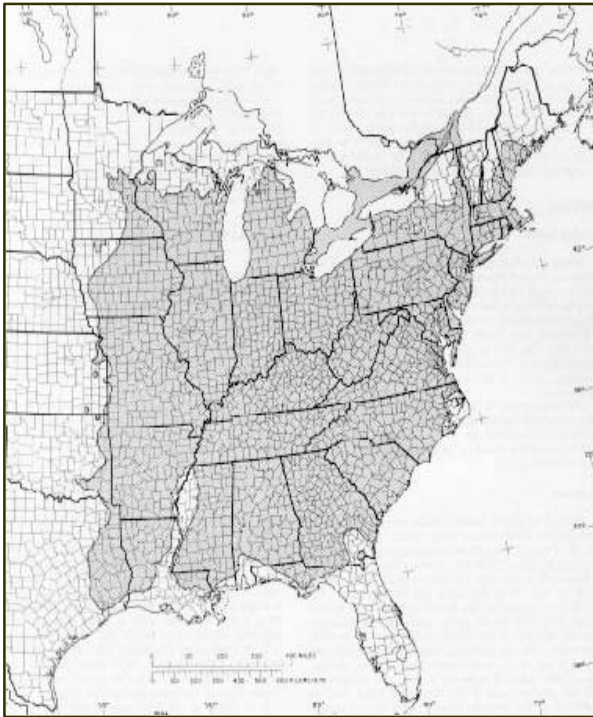
A splint, or 'split' (as it is called in the Appalachians and the Ozarks), is a flexible, thin strip of wood cut from the annual rings of white oak, hickory, maple, white or black ash, and occasionally from hazel, elm, or poplar. Of all these woods, white oak was the most preferred by the mountain basket makers.



Native range of white oak (*Quercus alba*)

The United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service maintains a website at <http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/> that provides information and assistance on forest health and tree care, natural resources management, and other forestry related topics. Among the other online publications are the two volumes of 'Silvics of North America'. These documents provide information about the biology of tree species growing in the forest lands of the United States. According to that white oak range from Maine to Minnesota, and south to northern Florida and Georgia, eastern

Oklahoma, eastern Kansas, and eastern Texas. The west slopes of the Appalachian Mountains and the Ohio and central Mississippi River Valleys have optimum conditions for white oak, but the largest trees have been found in Delaware and Maryland on the Eastern Shore.



Native range of white oak
Electronic source: Rogers, Robert. 1990

White oak grows under a wide variety of climatic conditions and on a wide range of soils and sites.



Preparation of splints

The usable part of the white oak for basket making is the part of the tree extending from about 6" above the ground to the first projecting limb or knot. The tree should yield a log that is six to ten feet in length and 5" to 6" in diameter. It should be

relatively straight with no twisting in the scales of the bark.

The preparation of the splint is probably the hardest job of making an oakwood basket. The log is split into quarters or eighths with a maul and wedges. All cuts throughout the splitting process are made from the top of the log towards the base. A cleaving tool (such as a froe) and a mallet are used to divide away the heartwood and to split, at right angles to the growth rings, each log into four quarters.

Splints are then separated by starting them with a knife, following the growth rings and tearing or pulling them apart with the hands. The process is continued by dividing each section of the strip by halves until the splints are reduced to the required thinness or until they reach the width of a single annual ring. Torn (rived) splints are stronger and more flexible than those sliced off with a tool because they are made up of long, continuous fibers which make up the grain of the wood.



Split oak basket from Southern Appalachia

As each piece is finished, the splints are placed in a shaving horse and trimmed with a sharp drawknife until they are smooth and of uniform thickness. Trimming for width is done later when the baskets are woven. The heartwood of the tree is generally used to make handles and rims of the baskets. The bark is used for dyeing. The bark of the log from which the splints have been removed is placed in a tub, covered with water, and allowed to soak for four days. The dye is then strained off and the splints are soaked in the dye for another four days. The splints are then grouped by length and bundled together, and are stored in a dry room to prevent mildew discoloration.

For comprehensive information regarding the splinting of white oak, please refer to 'Basketry of the Appalachian Mountains' by Stephenson (1977). This book also provides detailed information on basket making. A list of other relevant publications that may be found in most local libraries is provided.



Basket making

The splints are soaked in tepid water for ten to twenty minutes before weaving. The damp splints are then trimmed to desired width with a good, strong pair of shears.

The basket stakes are the upright or vertical splints. The weavers are the horizontal splints. The stakes are generally thicker than the weavers, but the width of stakes and weavers varies with the size and use of the basket. The wrapping or lashing holds the

rim to the handle and also ties the smaller ribs as they are added to the basket body.



Baskets displayed at a craft fair in Blacksburg, Virginia. November 2000.

The topmost weaver in the basket is trimmed at a gradual slope for several inches to allow it to meet the spiral without creating an abrupt, uneven step in height. A freshly woven basket must be allowed to dry out for at least a couple of days before completing the top border. The splints invariably shrink in the process of drying and, as a result, the weaving becomes loose. After the basket is dried, the weavers are packed down on the stakes until they are tight.



Baskets displayed at a craft fair in Blacksburg, Virginia. November 2000.



Marketing

Though there is a national market for high-quality art and handcrafted objects made from hand-woven materials, local markets are few. This is because it takes educated consumers to appreciate and value the quality and uniqueness of woven products made by hand from native materials.

Each region of the United States has its own market for weaving and basketry material. The supply houses buy and sell basketry and other weaving materials. Most people purchase their materials from these supply houses. There are a few wholesale buyers who buy and sell basketry materials. They primarily use catalogs for enhancing their business. Some of them conduct their business through retail stores.



Baskets displayed at a craft fair in Blacksburg, Virginia. November 2000.

Of late, baskets are marketed more often for their decorative value rather than for its utilitarian purposes. With the growing use

of the Internet, many basket makers are gaining increased exposure and markets for their products through this channel.

Another area of marketing baskets is the booming gift basket industry. Some of the gift basket makers purchase the baskets from independent craftspeople. A working relationship between the craftspeople and gift basket operator often turns out to be a profitable arrangement.



References and information resources

(You may be able to find some of these or other publications in your local library. Another valuable resource is your local cooperative extension office.)

Cary, Mara. 1975. *Basic Baskets*. Houghton Muffin Company. Boston.

Christopher, F. J. 1952. *Basketry*. Dover Publications, Inc. New York. 108 p.

Feiden, Karen L. 1979. *Basket Weaving*. Enlerson Books, Inc. Buchanan, New York.

Hart, Carol and Dan Hart. 1976. *Natural Basketry*. Watson-Guptill Publications. New York. 160 p.

Harvey, Virginia I. 1986. *The Techniques of Basketry*. University of Washington Press. Seattle. 128 p.

Irwin, John Rice. 1982. Baskets and the Basket Makers in Southern Appalachia. Schiffer Publishing Ltd. Exton, Pennsylvania. 191 p.

Lasansky, Jeannette. 1979. Willow, Oak & Rye: Basket Traditions in Pennsylvania. Keystone Books. 60 p.

Little, Elbert L., Jr. 1979. Checklist of United States trees (native and naturalized). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agriculture Handbook 541. Washington, D.C. 375 p.

Rogers, Robert. 1990. White Oak. In Silvics of North America. Russell M. Burns and Barbara H. Honkala, technical coordinators. Agriculture Handbook 654. U. S. Department of Agriculture. Washington, D.C. p. 605-613.

Stephenson, Sue H. 1977. Basketry of the Appalachian Mountains. Van Nostrand Reinhold Company. New York. 112 p. (This is an excellent source for those interested in starting production of baskets.)

Teleki, Gloria Roth. 1975. The Baskets of Rural America. E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc. New York. 202 p.

Thomas, Margaret G. and David R. Schumann. 1993. Income Opportunities in Special Forest Products: Self-Help Suggestions for Rural Entrepreneurs. Agriculture Information Bulletin AIB-666. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Washington, D.C. p. 189-196.



Electronic resources

Traditional Basketry in Virginia (Through the Folklife Program of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy)

<http://minerva.acc.virginia.edu>

'Baskets by Susan' is the web site of a traditional basket maker.

<http://home.sprynet.com/~aleo1/>

Country Baskets is an on-line gallery featuring handmade baskets, basket patterns, kits, and basketry supplies.

<http://www.countrybaskets.com/>

This web site highlights the Student Crafts Program at Berea College, Kentucky.

<http://www.bereacollegecrafts.com/>

Southern Highland Craft Guild is one of the strongest craft organizations in the United States

<http://www.southernhighlandguild.org/>

The following website lists many Basketry Associations & Guilds in the United States

<http://www.ulster.net/~abeebe/basgld.html>

Directory of U.S. basketry guilds and associations

<http://www.weavenet.com/guilds.htm>

Basket information listserv at Indiana University

basket-1@listserv.indiana.edu

Rogers, Robert. 1990. White Oak. In *Silvics of North America*. Russell M. Burns and Barbara H. Honkala, technical coordinators. Agriculture Handbook 654. U. S. Department of Agriculture. Washington, D.C. p. 605-613.
http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/silvics_manual/volume_2/querqus/alba.htm

All photographs by Tom Hammett.

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This is part of a series of fact sheets on non-timber forest products. The full set of fact sheets is available at the Non-timber Forest Products website: <http://www.sfp.forprod.vt.edu/>

Please give us your comments on this fact sheet and suggestions for future fact sheets. Direct your comments to Tom Hammett, Department of Wood Science and Forest Products, 210 Cheatham Hall (0323), Virginia Tech, Blacksburg VA 24061. Phone: (540)-231-2716. E-mail: himal@vt.edu.

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