

An Introduction to  
Natural Fiber Baskets  
by Martha Younkin

Hello all. I live out in the country, on ten acres, with my husband, and our dogs. Spring of 2001 began the restoration of a section of our land to tall-grass prairie. To date, what was once a dense stand of cedar trees, is now an established prairie and glade with over 312 native species.



I studied botany at Iowa State University, but basically I'm a self-taught fiber artist. I've gone in many creative directions over the years. The latest includes making rustic furniture, and cedar log footbridges that connect paths through the



prairie and woods. I also carve and wood burn gourds, and try to have a theme that includes

images of the tall-grass prairie, native plants, and wildlife.

I started making natural fiber baskets decades ago, and it remains a passion for me. I use the shoots, vines, bark, and long, fibrous leaves of certain plants. Many of the shoots are of Willow; vines of Honeysuckle, Wisteria, Virginia Creeper, and Akebia; barks of Shagbark Hickory, Eastern Red Cedar, American and Slippery Elm, Redbud, and Willow; and the leaves of Rattlesnake Master, Yucca, Siberian Iris, Cattails, Rushes, and Daylilies. Gathering all the different plants, knowing how each grows, learning when to best harvest them, and preparing them to use, all add to the whole dimension of the piece, that of a history, with roots, with a story behind it.

I do natural fiber workshops at my home, guiding people through the entire process of creating a basket from start to finish. We cut down a specific tree, shave off the outer bark, and peel the inner bark that will be used for the baskets. The wet strips of bark are coiled and hung to dry, and in a few weeks we get together again to prepare the bark and make the baskets. I love the tactile element of working with the materials, and the workshops give me the opportunity to share that love with other people.

Feel free to contact me for information about basket workshops, or to set up a time to see my baskets in person.



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## Natural Fiber Baskets

Throughout history, the Native Americans had an intimate knowledge and respect of their environment. Their use of the plant materials in the baskets and mats that they



wove shows evidence of that knowledge.

The Native American basket makers of the

Southwestern deserts used Yucca and Devil's Claw in almost all their work. The Yucca was bleached in the sun, which gave them white colors, and the Devil's Claw provided dark brown.



In the Midwest, the Osage and other tribes used more of

the plants that grew in the woods and prairies- the shoots, roots, and the inner bark of many different trees.

Rattlesnake Master is a native plant of the Midwestern prairies that was



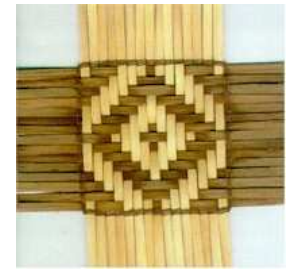
commonly twisted into cordage, along with yucca leaves.

Indian Hemp and the milkweeds are other common native prairie plants that were used to make cordage that was strong, and made thin enough to be used as thread.



The Native Americans were skilled at "thigh-spinning", and made long nets that they used to catch rabbits.

The Cherokee and Chitimacha people are famous for their river cane baskets, made from thin strips of the outer, shiny surface of the canes.



May we all learn to honor and respect the natural world in which we live. May we help to preserve the plants, animals, and their habitats, just as the Native People taught us by their example.

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