REED BASKETS, THEIR MANY USES AND HOW TO WEAVE THEM: BY MERTICE MACCREA BUCK

BASKETS are, and have been from time immemorial, so essential in the carrying on of our domestic life, that it is worth considering what styles are most suitable for various purposes, and what pleasure may be derived from making them. The accompanying cuts are of simple reed baskets suitable for country use. While of unpretentious design and of inexpensive material, they offer suggestions for receptacles for flowers and vegetables which may be elaborated to suit the worker's individual taste.

The great secrets of success in basketry are careful judgment as to form (and in this the fitness for purpose must be considered) and neatness of execution. A basket may be coarse, done with large material, and yet not produce a rough effect; but it must be solid, and tightly woven or it will soon begin to yield and grow “wobbly” when it is used. The work depends so much on the care of materials and the patience of the worker, and so little on tools—all that are needed being a pair of scissors, a rule, and a coarse knitting needle—that it is well to emphasize the importance of a little time being spent in getting the reeds just right before starting to weave.

A few general remarks may be helpful in regard to the choice and preparation of material. Reed, varying in size from No. 00, which is about as thick as knitting cotton, to No. 6, which is as large as a lead pencil, may be procured by the pound from kindergarden supply stores. In selecting it, care should be taken to get bundles in which the strands are white and flexible. Nos. 2, 4 and 5 are suitable for the baskets shown here. If it is desirable to introduce color, the completed basket may be dipped in dye or painted, but it is well to limit the color schemes to greens and browns.

In working in a pattern in color, dyed
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reed may be used. So-called Easy Dye, of light green, affords a pleasing shade, and if the reed is boiled about ten minutes in the dye, the color will be fairly permanent. Golden brown in the same dye is satisfactory. For those who are so fortunate as to know the old methods for dyeing with walnut bark, saffron, logwood, etc., artistic effects may be promised which will more than repay the labor expended; but color should be used sparingly, and in lines and simple bandings, rather than in elaborate patterns.

Perfection of execution is due largely to the condition of the material when the work is being done. The reeds must be rolled two or three at a time into coils, and soaked about ten minutes in hot water until they become pliable, to insure a fine tight weave. The accompanying pen-and-ink sketches show the method of starting the round bottomed baskets. The oval-bottomed

flower baskets are more difficult, and should not be attempted until some skill has been attained. The drop-handled flower basket is a particularly good model, as the folding handles make it easy to pack in a trunk.

In working at any basket it is well to insert extra spokes where the basket turns up, sticking in each almost to the center of the bottom. If necessary a knitting needle may be used to enlarge the space before pushing in the spokes. If it is desirable to give a spiral effect in the natural color and
seem a part of the landscape. Among our wild birds, bluebirds seem particularly willing to adapt to their own use a ready-made domicile, and even, it is said, to return to the same one year after year. This nest need not be very large, and may be fastened to a bough within sight of the house, as the bluebirds do not fly from their human neighbors. In Scandinavia such nests are very common, and the return of bird couples among the smaller feathered friends is counted upon, just as is the annual visit of the storks, who find their roosttree homes prepared with a foundation of a cart wheel by their hosts, ready to be added to with each successive spring.

Not only birds, but their natural enemies, cats and dogs, may be provided with homemade resting places. A friend of the author's acquaintance has a tortoise-shell cat which rejoices in a hand-made basket of brown and buff, with a touch of turquoise blue, which looks particularly charming with his tawny coloring. Finding this basket by the fireside, he proceeded to investigate with eyes, nose and claws, and the result being satisfactory, he at once took possession and has used it over two years.

The first requisites of baskets to hold potted plants, Cut IV, Figures 1 or 3, should be strength and simplicity; coarse materials, No. 5 for spokes and Nos. 3 and 4 for weaving, should be used. A wooden bottom may be used and this adds to the strength of the basket. Bass wood of 3/8 inch thickness makes a good base. The size of the
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Fig. 1. METHOD OF STARTING ROUND BOTTOMED BASKET.
Fig. 2. METHOD OF STARTING OVAL BOTTOMED BASKET (BASE).
Fig. 3. WORKING WITH TWO STRANDS (ONE COLORED).
Fig. 4. MELON BASKET (SIDE VIEW).
Fig. 5. END VIEW.

Fig. 1.

Fig. 2.

Fig. 3.

Fig. 4.

Fig. 5.

bottom having been decided on (9 or 10 inches would be suitable for a fern, or a small palm), a circle should be drawn on the wood with a compass, and the circular piece sawed out with a keyhole saw. The edges should be filed smooth and sandpapered. Inside this circle from the same center another circle should be drawn ½ inch inside this one, as a guide line along which points can be drawn for holes to be bored. These holes should be not more than 3/4 inch apart to insure firm weaving. The holes should be bored on the points thus indicated with a bit ½ inch in diameter. If it proves difficult to mark the points with a rule the compass set to 3/4 inch may be used to “step off” the required points on the guide line. To cut the spokes for a wooden bottomed basket it is necessary to first decide on the height desired, then double this and add one inch for the space between the holes, as each spoke goes from the top of the basket down through a hole, across the bottom of the wood to the next hole and then up, as shown in Cut V, Fig. 1. In a basket 12 inches high, 25 inch spokes should be allowed, for the actual height, then to each spoke 4 inches more should be allowed for the border, thus adding 8 inches to the 25, 33 inches in all. There should of course be half as many spokes as there are holes. These long strips should be cut and rolled and soaked in hot water until pliable. The weavers must also be soft. The weaving may be done with double or triple weave, and a row of openwork adds to the effect, as the dull red of the pottery showing through adds a nice note of color. The border should be flat, rather than coiled. The pen sketch, Cut V, Fig. 2, shows an open weave strengthened by carrying down extra spokes from the border and one of the photographs shows the same style of open weave ornamented by adding spokes to form a cross in each open space. The borders illustrated are all made strong by inserting extra spokes. Baskets to be used as jardinières may be stiffened by staining with oil paints mixed with much turpentine to prevent shininess. A very good color combination is that of burnt sienna and Prussian blue mixed so as to give a cloudy effect of greenish brown. This coloring harmonizes with potted ferns as well as flowering plants. The baskets are made less liable to warp by protecting the surface with the oil paint, and as plant baskets are often used on a veranda, this seems worth consideration. If it is desired to conceal the edge of the wooden bottom this may be done by tackling a braid on, over the edge of the wood, or by putting in extra spokes, short ones, from the back of the basket upward, leaving ends about two inches long, on which a few rows of weaving and a border may be put as shown in the photographic illustrations in Cut IV.

Jardinières of all reed are rather difficult,
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on account of the great length of the spokes required, but this difficulty may be obviated by weaving the bottom first, on eight spokes 10 inches long, exactly like the bottom of a small basket. When the weaving has proceeded nearly to the end of the spokes, a strip 14 inches long may be inserted beside each spoke, the basket turned up omitting these ends, which may be cut off or used to form a woven base similar to that already mentioned.

When cut flowers have to be transported from place to place it is desirable to have them protected from light and dust. Two simple baskets are illustrated, Cut VI and Cut IV, Fig. 2, which may be used for this purpose. Cut VI represents a small basket, about 8 inches across, intended especially for the packing of a bunch of violets, the raised cover preventing the crushing of the topmost blossoms. One florist recently used five dozen similar to this. The larger basket allows cut flowers to lie loosely without bending the stems. Two upright holders for cut flowers are also illustrated.

These baskets are very suitable to decorate with color. The smaller ones are attractive dipped after they are completed in a soft toned dye bath—baby blue in Diamond Dyes gives a delicate dull blue, and Easy Dye gives tan, dull green and lavender. The latter color and old rose, however, are hard to render permanent on reed. Large baskets are liable to lose their shape if dipped in dye, and are more satisfactory stained with oil paint and turpentine as described above.

Trays are most fascinating examples of the basketmakers' art. The woven one at the left of Cut VII offers but little difficulty, as it resembles a low round basket, but the glass bottomed one, Fig. 2, is quite complex. A wooden bottom must be used to keep the glass in place, and the weaving is done around this. To accomplish this, it is necessary to use a large piece of cardboard on which a line is drawn exactly the size of the wooden bottom, to hold the weaving in place. The cardboard is pierced with holes one-half inch apart through which small spokes are run, projecting both above and below the cardboard about 4 inches. The top may then be woven 1 1/2 inches high. The upright ends of the spokes should then be worked down through as far as the wooden bottom and pulled out inside to make a border as illustrated in the photograph. The cardboard may then be pulled out, the glass, cretonne and wooden bottom put in place, and the weaving continued to form the lower part of the tray.

A very good finish is made by bending the bottom of the spokes in toward the center, and weaving a border on the bottom of the tray to hold the board solid.

Space cannot be given here to directions for elaborate borders, handles and covers, as only the most elementary principles can be taught in so brief a paper. But the appended illustrations of actual baskets, most of which were made in a home for chronic invalids, will offer suggestion as to the methods of working out the more difficult problems of the fitting of covers and adjusting of suitable handles. The large basket shown in detail in Cut IX shows an interesting method of dealing with the cover; as this sinking of the handle allows the basket to be packed in a trunk without taking up undue space. The handles of this basket are wound with heavy chair cane.

It is also strengthened by corded of No. 6 weave around the sides.

The most interesting feature of all these baskets is the original manner of applying the various weaves, and it is hoped that the reader will devise still more quaint and practical designs.

All the baskets which illustrate this article were woven by Miss Buck according to the instructions given here and the result, as the pictures show, is not only practical but extremely attractive.