

Building Baskets

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The weaver visualizes the completed basket. Even before she reaches for the first split, she knows the size, shape, and form of the container and how many splits she will need. Every decision she makes draws on personal experience and on collective traditions of weaving. Each decision must take into account the amount of available material. One stalk of cane produces four to eight splits that are less than a half inch wide, nearly translucent, and completely flexible. A medium-size single-weave rivercane basket may require fifty to seventy-five splits. The number varies with the length of the stalk, width of the splits, and the size, shape, and density of the container.

Over time, certain features, such as shape, handles, rims; lids, binding, split size, and color, have come to characterize Cherokee rivercane basketry. The basket bases are square or rectangular because cane is woven on a grid. The bodies are

gently rounded or completely circular. Prior to removal, Cherokees made handles with fabric or thong rather than carved wood. They pushed a narrow strap through the basket sides and knotted each end of the strap on the inner sides. Lids did not attach to the baskets. A separate lid fitting tightly over the sides could be removed and used as an additional basket. Splits for baskets or mats might be less than a quarter inch wide and were woven with the shiny cane surface turned to the outside. Rims were splits of cane bound on with narrow strips of cane or hickory.

Cane patterns are made by varying the twill weave and dyeing the splits. By changing the number of vertical splits crossed by each horizontal split and by alternating splits of different colors, a weaver can produce an almost unlimited number of angular designs. Each pattern is numerically based and has to be memorized, which means that continual counting is required for each design. The complexity and distinctive character of cane patterns suggest that at one time they belonged to their creators and were passed down from mother to daughter. Many weavers would have seen them, but none could readily reproduce them.

As clearly as seals on documents or signatures on letters, such characteristics of form identified Cherokee baskets. In 1754, a group of warriors from "Great Terraqua" (Tellico) in the Overhills followed enemy tracks to a "Mush Basket" that had been taken from a canoe and abandoned. "Knowing it to be of Cherokee make," the warriors pursued and killed the thieves. The basket was not made by a woman of Tellico but of neighboring Tannasse, Yet, the attributes of size, shape, weave, dye, and pattern were so distinctively Cherokee that the warriors readily identified it as one of their own.

One of the oldest and most difficult traditions in basketry is a technique called doubleweave. A doubleweave basket is actually two complete baskets, one woven inside the other, with a common rim. The weaver begins with the base of the first, or interior, basket, placing the shiny outer surface of the splits facing up. She weaves obliquely up all four sides to the rim, bends the splits outward, and then continues weaving obliquely down the sides of the second, or external, basket. She finishes on a diagonal at the base of the outside basket. The result is a strong, flexible, double-layered basket with the glossy side of the splits showing on both the interior and exterior. Since the inner and outer baskets join only at the rim, a skilled weaver can put different patterns on the inside and outside.

Doubleweaves are the most durable of baskets, and cane is the most durable basket material. Like the tusti bowl of Kanane-ski Amai-yehi, woven rivercane naturally resists damage by water or fire. The tough, glossy cortex of cane makes it nearly impervious to the elements.

In 1982, a fire on the Cherokee reservation completely burned a row of buildings, including a shop whose front window displayed a rivercane doubleweave storage basket and lid. Winter rain and snow gradually covered the ashes. Several months passed before shop owner Tom Underwood poked through the debris scattered at the site and discovered the cane basket. It was burned, soaked, and crushed, lying under a collapsed table at the rear of the shop where it had been blown by a blast of water from the firefighters' hoses. Underwood extracted the basket and carried it home, cleaned it with abrasive solvents over a period of several months, and gradually reconstructed it. He subsequently brought the container to his new shop and put it on a shelf for display. With colors still strong, the designs intact, and the shape restored, it stands as remarkable testimony to the durability of rivercane doubleweave baskets.

The hard, glossy finish so characteristic of cane derives from silica, a component of every grass from cane to corn. Silica encrusts and permeates canes outer sheath, providing a hard covering that is perhaps ten times more resistant to breaking or tearing than woods of the same weight. Silicic hardening begins when cane tissues stop elongating, a process that takes about three years. While stems are growing, their internodes fill with water and silica in solution. The water gradually transpires to the developing foliage, leaving behind small particles of hydrous silica in the form of a cottony residue. It appears as white tufts in the nodes and is familiar to anyone who has ever split a cane stalk. After about three years of growth, cane has become good basket material.



Rivercane doubleweave basket with lid, dyed with walnut and bloodroot.

Made by Rowena Bradley in 1982.

The basket and lid survived a fire, water damage, compression, and harsh cleaning solvents.

Private collection. Photograph by Sarah H. Hill.