

Beyond Pine Needles: Alternative Basketry Materials (ABM)

By Anne Westwater, Basket Maker/Instructor, Sea Ranch CA

The following is a list of ten ABM that grow locally (northern Sonoma, southern Mendocino County Coast), plus a few suggested collection locations. There are also some suggestions about how to process, store and use the materials.

***It's important to learn WHEN and WHERE and HOW to collect these plant materials so that you collect at a time and in a way that won't harm the plant. Be sure to ask permission before collecting from private property.*

1. Chasmanthe ("Aunt Eliza") - Montbretia - Crocosmia - all similar-looking plants that grow in clumps from underground corms. Plants have long, sword-shaped leaves that can be cut at the base after plant finishes flowering. Flowers (usually bright red-gold) are produced on stalks and leaves die back naturally as flowers fade. Color of dried leaves varies from pale green to light tan.

To process, store and use: Lay leaves flat to dry, turning occasionally. When thoroughly dry, tie into bunches and hang or store in paper bags. Dampen briefly before using as weavers or in coiling. These thin (but strong) leaves do NOT need long soaking or mellowing before use. Use ASAP after dampening to prevent mold from forming.

Plants can be found locally near Jay Baker parking lot (under weeping willow), growing in roadside ditches on Stagecoach Rd between Hwy 1 and turn-off to Gualala Arts, also along road leading into GA. I have found it on the debris pile outside the fence at Del Mar garden after gardeners cut it back in late summer.

2. Daylily - same methods as wild iris below. Daylilies are a common landscaping plant and can often found in gardens or around public buildings. Collect yellowed leaves before they mildew. Color of fully dried leaves will vary from pale yellow to cream through various shades of tan. Dried daylily leaves do not need to be soaked or mellowed, just use water in a spray bottle to dampen them before use. Dampen only as many leaves as you will use at one time to prevent mold.

3. Douglas Iris - "wild iris" - grows almost everywhere in this area, from sunny, grassy meadows to clearings in the forest.

To process, store and use: Collect dried leaves from plant clumps when leaves are turning shades of honey, amber and rust. Don't wait too long or leaves become molded, brittle and ratty. Do not collect green leaves at all; the plant needs them to produce food to store for next year. (Cut deep green leaves will turn an ugly muddy khaki in revenge!) Clumps of iris that

grow in forest clearings often produce much longer leaves than clumps growing in full sun. Dry leaves completely either indoors or outside in shade. Turn occasionally. Tie into bunches after dried and hang or store in paper bags. Mellow before use (see note below).

Mellowing - dried Douglas iris and Watsonia leaves should be immersed in water for a few minutes and then wrapped in a slightly damp towel. After a few hours (or overnight), the leaves will have "mellowed" (thoroughly re-hydrated) and will be ready to use. Mellowed leaves can be used both in coiling or weaving. Both leaf types make good cordage.

4. Honeysuckle - this perennial vine does not grow in the abundant thickets that can be found in warmer areas of the country, but it does grow here in a variety of habitats, including the forest. I often see it growing along the ground near the base of trees or sometimes climbing the tree. Once you recognize the characteristic two oval leaves placed directly opposite each other along the vine, you'll start seeing it in many locations. Long runners can be pulled from under grass or fir/redwood thatch on the ground. *Watch for poison oak in the vicinity!*

To process, store and use: Remove the leaves on the honeysuckle vine by running your gloved hand down its length starting at the tip and then twist into a coil. If desired, the bark can be removed by simmering the coil in water for at least one hour, maybe longer if the vine is old. After simmering, the bark slides off easily by running a cloth down the vine. The vine's color will be cream to pale green. Use fresh or soak the dried vine to the desired state of flexibility (about five minutes) before coiling or weaving. De-barked honeysuckle vine takes dye very well. I used Rit dye in a hot water bath on the stovetop for about 15 minutes, then rinsed the coil thoroughly in a 50/50 solution of white vinegar and water (to set dye) and dried the coil outdoors in the shade.

5. Horsetail (Equisetum) Primitive plants that grow along Gualala River banks, in drainage ditches or any place that's undeveloped and damp. I have found two types in this area - one with side "branches" at joints and one unbranched. Fresh cut stems can be rooted in water and transplanted to soil at home. Can be invasive; planting in a container is advisable. Dry the stems, remove side branches (if present) and hang or store in paper bag. Provides an interesting pattern when added in small amounts to coiled baskets but too insubstantial to use alone. Can be worked into a frame/rib basket when green but expect a lot of shrinkage as it dries. Dried stems do not retain deep green color.

6. New Zealand flax (Phormium tenax) Plants form very large clumps with long sword-shaped leaves that range in color from olive green to variegated yellow-green to red or burgundy. Extremely tough, fibrous leaves can be cut at base from outer edges of plant at any time. Leaves may be split length-wise ("stripped") into various widths to use in coiling/weaving/twining/plaiting. Flax makes tough cordage but is not as easy to twist by hand as iris/daylily or Watsonia. However you use it, expect 50% shrinkage as it dries. Does not take dye or stain well. Colored leaves fade rapidly once cut from plant. Examples of NZ flax

plants can be seen in Cypress Village landscaping, at Catholic Church, Gualala Arts parking lot and at Ohlson Ranch House.

7. Watsonia - South African native; naturalized in Australia (where it's considered a serious weed pest). Garden escapees that have sprouted from corms in discarded soil grow in the wild to some extent in this area as well. Several types can be found locally. Plants form large clumps of long, sword-shaped leaves and produce white, pink or salmon-colored flowers on tall spikes late spring-summer. Leaves die back naturally after flowers fade. My favorite Watsonia for baskets has long leaves that turn a rich mahogany brown with a bright gold edge after the plant flowers and while the leaves are still on the clump. Color of dried leaves is permanent. Another type of Watsonia goes through a stage when the leaves are shades of red to burgundy before turning fully tan. If gathered during the intermediate color stage, the leaves retain those colors and make lovely basket material.

Collecting Watsonia is possible beginning in late spring through late summer. Leaves of my favorite variety which are picked while still green will dry to a pale yellow green, but it's really best to let the plant go through its natural cycle before collecting leaves. Time window for collecting is small because leaves soon become spotted with mold, especially if it's a foggy summer. Stored indoors, the leaves seem to retain their colors quite well.

To process and store: Cut dried leaves from the clump, rinse off and allow to dry out before bundling. Partially dried leaves should be rinsed, then completely air dried in a shady place outdoors or inside. Be sure all leaves are thoroughly dry before storage or fungus will form wherever moisture is retained. Tie clean, dried leaves in bundles and hang or store in paper bags. **To use:** Soak the dried leaves for a few minutes to soften them. I remove the tough, brittle center vein with an Exacto blade which produces two $\frac{1}{2}$ inch strips for coiling or weaving. Dampen and mellow strips before use. (See wild iris for "mellowing" directions.) Watsonia also makes handsome, strong cordage.

Watsonia grows wild along roadsides near Jay Baker/Gualala Mobile Park, in the Hwy 1 roadside ditch in the Salt Point Park area (ex. near Ocean Cove store, at Hwy 1 mile marker 39 and further north close to mm 45). There's a large clump near Del Mar Center at Sea Ranch. There's also a very large quantity of one type of Watsonia growing along Hwy 1 in the Little River area. You can buy bulbs and grow your own, but planting in a container is advisable. Watsonia can and will take over an area.

8. Wild Grasses (contributed by Lynn Kelleher) Some of the wild grasses that grow along our coast work well for coiling. Lynn gathers a mix of wild oats and wheat from the Walk On Beach area where the grasses can grow to a height of five feet! It's best to gather the grasses in late winter and early spring if you want to use them fresh. The green stems are more flexible at that time and have a bit of sheen. Lynn also washes and dries wild grasses for later use. Once dried, the grass is a straw color and more fragile. To store, Lynn rolls the large dried

bundle in a piece of foam packing paper. When gathered into a small bundle the grasses form a nice coil and will bend with the thread as they are sewn into a basket.

9. Willow - grows wild in many places here but primarily along stream-beds, drainage ditches, etc. If you find a clump, you might try pruning some branches back to the ground in late fall/winter to encourage the spring growth of new, straight and long branches. These work best for basketry. There's an accessible clump of wild willow growing from a previously fallen tree at the north end of the airstrip at Sea Ranch. Wild willow has pale, grayish-green narrow leaves and long flexible branches which can be used as frame material for frame/rib style baskets. An effective method for forming hoops is to strip off the leaves and then coil the fresh willow branches into a straight-sided container. Allow hoops to dry several weeks. In spring, willow branches (withes) can be easily peeled, revealing the smooth, creamy white inner wood. Withes gathered and dried with brownish-green bark intact will turn deep brown or black. Dried withes must be soaked several days to restore flexibility before using in baskets. So far I have only used willow for the rim, handle and ribs of baskets.

Twisted (corkscrew/curly) willow (Salix tortuosa) is an ornamental tree with branches that show a very interesting twisted growth habit. Prunings can be used to make "eccentric" or asymmetric basket frames and handles, but this willow will not retain its smooth bark and red color as it dries. The bark will turn reddish brown and shrivel to some extent. It's still attractive and useful. This willow may be found growing in local gardens. Be sure to ask permission to prune.

10. Wisteria - If you have access to a mature wisteria vine that has not been pruned and has produced long runners, you're in luck! The gray-barked runners make wonderful coiled hoops for basket frames, especially for natural or "eccentric" baskets like those described in Pat Dale's and Maryanne Gilooly's books (see reference list below). My own wisteria runner source isn't really local; I found a neglected vine in a city parking lot in Sebastopol. If you know a source for an old, neglected wisteria vine, ask permission to prune. Coil the runners immediately to make hoops. Expect significant diameter shrinkage (up to 50%) of the runners as they dry.

References: Books I have used most frequently to teach myself about using wild materials include: Natural Baskets - edited by Maryanne Gilooly; Basketry and Weaving with Natural Materials - Pat Dale; Fibre Basketry: Homegrown and Handmade - edited by Helen Richardson

There are many other books or sections within books available on this topic. Ex: Carol Hart's Natural Basketry. Online information can also be useful (ex. www.basketmakers.com/tutorials)

A final note: I have restricted this list to the plants I have personally collected, processed and used in making baskets. There are many other plants in our area that are potential sources of basketry materials. If you share my interest and have questions, you may contact me (Anne Westwater) at awest@mcn.org