

RURAL ENTERPRISE SERIES

RES-05

Traditional White Oak Basketmaking Enterprise

In this day of mechanization, it still takes a pair of human hands to weave an oakwood basket. Traditional crafters who make baskets the old-fashioned way, with traditional tools, can market their sturdy wares for a premium price in niche markets. There are many sources of cheap, foreign-made baskets available in chain department stores, but traditional crafters have a unique market niche. Baskets come in all shapes and sizes, from small knick-knack baskets to clothes hampers and laundry baskets to wine bottle or casserole dish baskets. Some basketmakers also weave chair and stool seats. The custom order business can be lucrative. How you market your baskets is the real key. Locating lucrative outlets is important and takes time.



Basket from Peterboror Basket Co., Peterborough, NH.

The easiest way to learn this craft is from a master. It may take an experienced weaver about 5 hours to make a basket, from cutting down the tree to the finished basket. It takes a while to build up experience so that you can spot a tree that will make good baskets. It also takes practice to become proficient and quick at basket making.

Making oak baskets requires little capital investment and allows great flexibility in learning a skill and meeting people. The return can provide a supplemental source of income for those in rural or suburban areas who market their wares through fairs and festivals.

Production Methods

The first step to making a great basket is finding the right tree. White oaks are traditionally used. The ideal tree will be 4 to 8 inches in diameter at breast height and have soft, flaky, scaly bark. Trees suited for basketmaking usually grow in fairly rich soils. Trees growing on limestone or shale soils don't usually work very well because the wood tends to be wiry and stiff and may break easily. You want a tree that has grown straight up towards the sun. The first branches or knots should be at least 6 feet up. You'll use only the trunk from above the root swell to below the first branches. A tree grown in an open field usually won't do because it tends to grow out rather than up. You don't want a tree whose growth has been suppressed by being overtopped by other trees. You also don't want a tree that has grown too quickly, be-

cause it can be difficult to split. Cut the tree at the ground about 1 foot above the basal root swell. If the tree cuts in a spiral when you're trying to split it, it won't work well for basketry.

Trees can be cut at any time of the year, but how the wood is stored will depend upon the weather conditions. During the warm dry summer, the wood you're not working with has to be kept in a cool, moist place to keep it from becoming dry and brittle. During cooler and more humid weather conditions, there are fewer problems with the wood drying out.

Once the unbranched trunk is cut, it is halved, then one half is set aside and the other half is halved again, and again, and so on. Once you have strips of wood, test their usability for basketmaking by bend-

ing them. If they snap at this stage, they will not work in a basket and you'll need to start over with a new tree. Splints are then made by separating out the growth rings, or thicker pieces if that is desired. Some basketmakers then trim the splints on a shaving horse to make them a uniform thickness. The heartwood (central core) of the tree is often used to make basket handles and rims. The stripped bark can be soaked in water to make a dye for the splints. One tree trunk can provide material for as many as 30 baskets.

Skills and Time Needed

Some upper-body strength is needed to split the wood down to make traditional oakwood baskets. Finger strength and dexterity are also needed. A person who has experience with cutting, splitting, or carving wood will have an advantage.

Equipment and Resources Needed

The tools of the traditional basketmaking trade include a chainsaw, several splitting wedges, a hatchet, a maul, a knife with a strong, stiff blade, and a wooden mallet. Many people already own some of these items and most are not high-cost items, which means that a person getting starting making baskets will not have high capital costs.

Marketing Concerns

The most common way to sell traditional oakwood baskets is at craft fairs, festivals, and tourist locations. A person who does basketmaking only part-time, say an average of 1 day per week, might go to as many as 20 shows or sales events per year. To keep your costs down, most should be within a few hours of home. It pays for experienced crafters to get a steady gig demonstrating the craft at a state or national park or heritage center, such as George Washington's Mount Vernon in Virginia or Plymouth Plantations in Massachusetts. These steady appearances help to build up a clientele because word of mouth tends to be a very effective advertising mechanism for such an enterprise. They also do not require payment of a booth fee. Experienced crafters may also be able to get exclusive contracts to meet all the basketry needs of historical sites.

It may be helpful to develop a marketing brochure showing some of the styles of baskets available. You may also want to pass out business cards that list

some of your upcoming show dates on the back.

Financial Picture

Prices might range from \$12 for a small simple basket to \$125 for an elaborate egg basket. Casserole baskets and wine baskets, which tend to sell well, go for \$30-40 each. A laundry basket might sell for \$80. A person who makes about 100 baskets per year and sells them for an average of \$40 each will gross about \$4,000 annually. This is before expenses, mainly for traveling to craft shows. Costs include gasoline; wear and tear on your vehicle; booth fees; packaging, if any; your time to drive there and back, set up, staff a booth, and take down your wares; and food and lodging, if necessary. It might cost about \$300 to attend a show about 8 hours from home; therefore, you need to carefully choose the events you attend and focus on those that bring the best return. There's also the opportunity cost of your time—time you could spend in some other way. You'll have bookkeeping costs, minimal tool costs, and costs of taking your vehicle to harvest trees.

Thanks to Alan Miller of ALMAR Creations for sharing the details of his operation with us. ALMAR Creations, HC 32 Box 33, Upper Tract, WV 26866.

Addendum: Wooden Utensil-making Enterprise

If you're good with your hands and you like working with wood, you may also enjoy carving traditional kitchen utensils, such as spoons, spatulas, pie servers, and salad tongs. There are two basic market niches with this type of enterprise. The first involves utensils that are largely handmade with traditional techniques. Traditional artisans may use a band saw to cut the wood into the rough shape of the piece, then use gougers to complete the piece by hand. A high-quality, sturdy gouger may cost about \$50-60. An assortment of wood rasps is also needed. While some of the handworking tools can be costly, it is not difficult for most people to afford the startup costs. The second market niche involves using power tools (saws, sanders, etc.) to produce large quantities of utensils. This is a pro-



Courtesy of Wood 'N Wares, Belgrade, MT

equipment and supervision of labor. Some artisans who start out using traditional techniques will sometimes move into a more production-oriented enterprise after they learn the business.

A large, traditionally made American chestnut spoon or a walnut or cherry pie server might sell for \$20. Spatulas sell for \$8-15, depending on the style. An experienced carver working in this field for 1–2 days per week on average and making about 200 utensils per year might gross about \$2,000.

Common woods for utensils include black cherry, walnut, yellow birch, American beech, white oak, sassafras, American chestnut, and butternut. The use of different woods allows for great variety and creativity.

It takes about 1 hour for an experienced crafter to make a spoon. It pays to have a niche, such as being able to say that your utensils are made by hand with traditional tools.

Thanks to Alan Miller of ALMAR Creations for sharing the details of his operation with us. ALMAR Creations, HC 32 Box 33, Upper Tract, WV 26866.

Information Resources

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Stephenson, S.H. 1977. Basketry of the Appalachian Mountains. Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., NY.

Peterboror Basket Co., Peterborough, NH, www.peterborobasketco.com.

Wood 'N Spoons, Belgrade, MT, www.woodenwaresmontana.com.

Authors

Jonathan S. Kays, Regional Extension Specialist,
Natural Resources

Joy R. Drohan, Faculty Extension Assistant
Western Maryland Research and Education Center

BASKETMAKING ENTERPRISE				
INCOME	# BASKETS PER YEAR	SALE PRICE PER BASKET		TOTAL INCOME
Wine baskets	30	\$40.00		\$1,200.00
Laundry baskets	10	\$80.00		\$800.00
Casserole baskets	32	\$40.00		\$1,280.00
Egg baskets	4	\$125.00		\$500.00
Knickknack baskets	18	\$12.00		\$216.00
Total income				\$3,996.00
VARIABLE COSTS				
	# EVENTS	# DAYS	\$ PER TRIP	TOTAL COST
Travel to distant show	1	2	420	\$420.00
Mileage (360 mi. round trip)			120	
Food and lodging			200	
Booth fee			100	
Travel to nearby shows	9	1	147	\$1,323.00
Mileage (120 mi. round trip)			40	
Lunch			7	
Booth fee			100	
Travel to exhibitions	10	1	47	\$470.00
Mileage (120 mi. round trip)			40	
Lunch			7	
Total variable costs				\$2,213.00
NET INCOME OVER VARIABLE COSTS				
Net profit				\$1,783.00
Assumptions:				
Operator obtains all wood for free and from within 20 miles of home.				
Operator already owns all tools needed and has a reliable and suitable vehicle for transporting logs and baskets.				
Operator works at this enterprise only about 1 day per week.				
Travel to distant shows includes gasoline (400 miles), wear and tear on your vehicle, booth fees, food and lodging.				
Travel to nearby shows includes gasoline (120 miles), wear and tear on your vehicle, booth fees, and lunch.				
Travel to exhibitions includes gasoline (120 miles), wear and tear on your vehicle, and lunch.				
Mileage is charged at \$0.345/mile.				