

# EXPLORE NORTH CAROLINA

## Basketry Traditions of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians

Basketry is the most well-known form of Eastern Cherokee crafts. Baskets were traditionally used in nearly every aspect of Cherokee daily life—farming, cooking, bartering, household tasks, ceremonial rituals, and even games. Basketweavers learned their handicraft from family members and community master weavers. As they made their creations, they used traditions thousands of years old as well as their own artistic expression. Over time baskets evolved as weavers experimented with new materials and patterns.



The primary materials used in basketmaking are rivercane, white oak, sugar maple, Japanese honeysuckle vines, and hickory bark. These materials cannot be purchased in stores, but must be harvested from nature. With a simple knife, plant materials are turned into weaving strips called splints. The basketweaver first collects stalks or logs, then strips them of leaves or twigs and cuts them into equal-size pieces, which are scraped smooth to form splints.

After the splints are cut to size, they are dyed. Dyes come from plants and can be found in leaves, flowers, seeds, roots, nuts, or fruits. Dyes made from plants are called vegetable dyes. Plants used by Cherokee basketmakers include bloodroot, butternut, black walnut, and yellowroot. Bloodroot yields a red-brown color, butternut produces dark black, black walnut creates brown, and yellowroot makes golden yellow. To dye splints, basketmakers boil them in a pot with the vegetable dye until they reach the desired color.

Before beginning a basket, the weaver imagines the form it will take and the colors and patterns to be used. Basket shapes are loosely classified as flat, jar, dish, and bowl and are based on basic geometric forms like cylinders, cubes, and cones. Decorative patterns on Eastern Cherokee baskets are created by variations in weaving techniques and color. Patterns often have brown, black, red, and yellow elements on a natural, undyed background. Shapes such as triangles, rectangles, squares, zig-



zags, lines, and diamonds can appear in the weaving designs.

Eastern Cherokee basketweavers employ three major weaving techniques—checkerwork, twilling, and wickerwork. Checkerwork, also known as plaiting, is usually used for oak and maple splints and is based on a basic over-and-under pattern.

Twilling is the oldest Cherokee basketweaving technique and dates back thousands of years to the Cherokee's ancient ancestors. This technique is best carried out with rivercane splints and produces geometric patterns based on a diagonal grid. When weaving twilled patterns, basketmakers also use a technique called double weave. With this method, two layers of are woven together so that both the inside and the outside of the basket reveal the shiny surface of the rivercane splints.

Wickerwork is the most common weaving technique. Weaving thin honeysuckle splints in front of and behind wide, flat oak spokes creates a wickerwork pattern.

To finish a basket, the weaver wraps a strip

of hickory bark or oak around the rim using a technique called coiling. Often a matching woven lid or a handle carved from hickory or white oak is added.

Modern Eastern Cherokee basketmakers are keeping their traditions alive in new ways that reflect modern needs. While many basketmakers continue to make traditional basket forms, they also craft objects like picnic baskets, shopping baskets, and handbags. To find examples of Eastern Cherokee baskets and learn more about basketry traditions, visit the Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual Inc. in Cherokee, North Carolina, as well as the Oconaluftee Indian Village, where you will see demonstrations of basketmaking practices.

### Mark Your Calendar!

Come to the **14th Annual American Indian Heritage Celebration** at the North Carolina Museum of History in downtown Raleigh on **Saturday, November 21**. Check out the Museum of History's Web site, [ncmuseumofhistory.org](http://ncmuseumofhistory.org), to find out more about the celebration and other programs about American Indians. Don't miss your chance to experience 10,000 years of history in one day!

### Activity

Look through today's newspaper for other North Carolina crafts. What can you learn about them from the ads or articles? Have you ever done any crafts yourself? If so, which ones? How did you learn to do them?