

DIG ART!

CULTIVATING CREATIVITY
IN THE GARDEN



Natural Fibers & Dyes: Weaving with Plants

Overview Students use plant materials harvested from the garden to collaboratively weave a large container for compost, known as a bird's nest bin. Students can then build on these skills with more in-depth weaving projects using plants.

Objectives Students will:

- work with different plant fibers to make a functional basket/bin
- explore weaving and basket making techniques

Time 1.5 hours

Materials

- plants suitable for weaving projects such as pampas grass leaves, daylily stems, grapevine, honeysuckle vine, wisteria, etc.
- big weeds, old stalks (sunflower, kale, broccoli, etc.), tree or shrub clippings, sod dug up to make way for your garden, old hay—basically any spent plant material
- 4 long wooden stakes
- pruning shears to cut plant materials

Background There are many natural materials found in and around your garden that can be harvested for weaving projects such as baskets, mats, and wreaths. Winter is an optimal time to gather woody vines, such as honeysuckle, grapevine, and wisteria, in preparation for weaving projects. Baskets can be woven from these different materials and making them is a satisfying and relaxing activity. It's also a very useful garden craft—students can use their baskets to collect harvested garden produce or to gather clippings for compost.

Weaving is thought to be the most ancient of the arts. Some say humans mimicked the intricate nests of the weaver-bird or the graceful patterns of a spider web. Others credit the combination of human ingenuity and survival needs. Whatever its origin, weaving and other forms of textile production have become so essential that it now has a significant presence in our language, customs, and literature.

According to archeologists, the oldest known baskets are probably 10,000 to 12,000 years old and found in Egypt. Basket weaving has changed its forms, materials, and techniques over these years. Traditionally, basket makers gather and prepare their own raw materials, but materials are also available for purchase. Reed, oak, hickory splits, cedar, willows, cattail, sweetgrass, and ash are common basket weaving materials.

Coiled baskets are made with rushes and grasses. A bunch is stitched in a spiral oval or round shape. *Plaiting* uses those materials that are ribbon like and wide, like yucca or palms. Similar materials are braided together and the pattern can be checkered or crossed. *Twining* uses elements from roots and tree bark. In this type, two or more materials are made to encircle another base material.

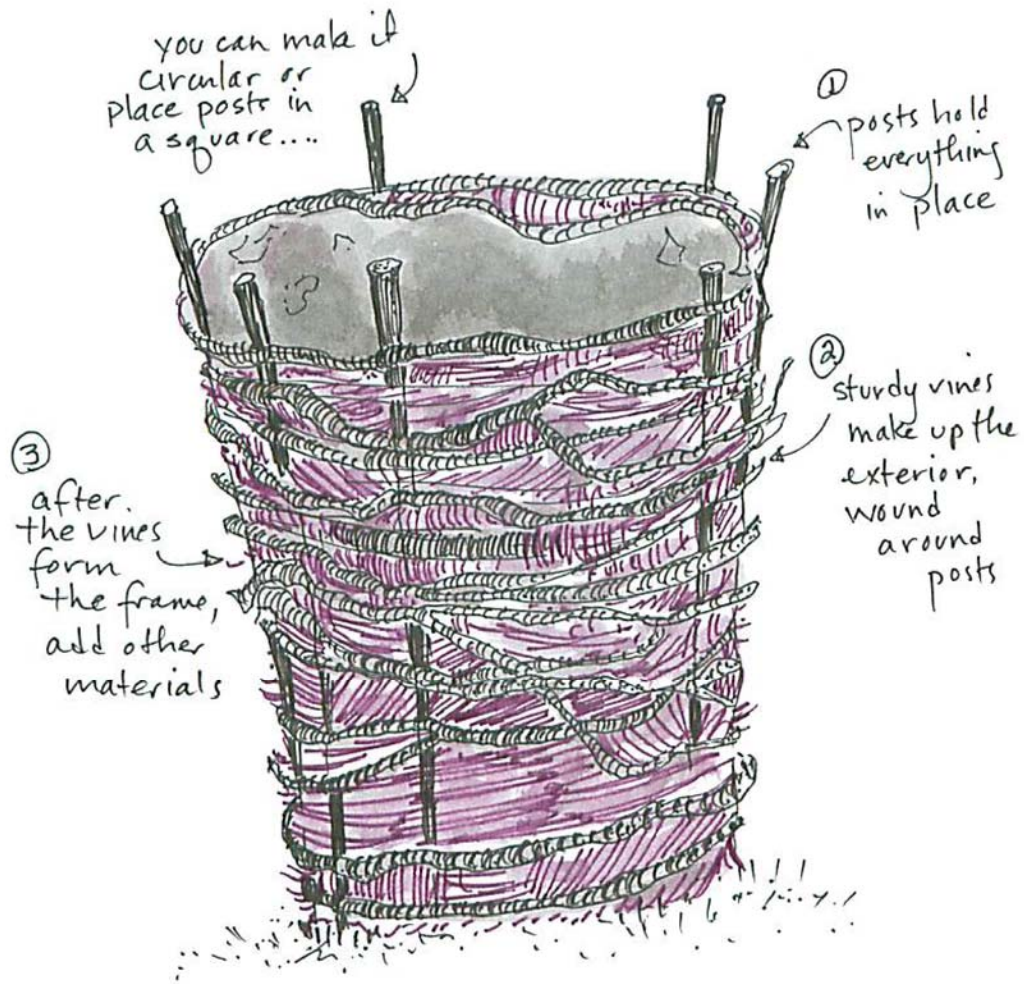
As beginner basket weavers, encourage your students to experiment with different types of techniques and materials. Whatever materials they work with should be harvested **before** the sap begins to run in early spring (winter is an optimal time for harvesting) and to choose younger vines that are woody, but still flexible. Older, thicker vines can be used in making the framework of their baskets.

In order to give students the opportunity to practice weaving techniques before starting an individual project, first work together as a group to build a bird's nest compost bin for your garden. This will provide students with the opportunity to explore working with natural materials and plant fibers.

The bird's nest bin, also known as the binless bin, is a naturally constructed compost bin built out of the large, coarse plant materials found in your garden. Big stalky materials, such as broccoli and kale plants, prunings from bushes, and sunflower stalks, are woven together to make up the walls of the compost bin. There are many benefits to a bird's nest compost bin. First of all, they are really fun to make! They are also natural and reminiscent of a bird's nest so they blend naturally into the garden landscape. Through using locally harvested materials to construct it, there is no need to buy plastic bins or build other structures. Also, by separating the finer materials from the bulky ones, you will find that the compost pile will break down faster.

Instructions

1. Begin by choosing an appropriate spot in the garden for your compost bin and put four stakes into the ground there, far enough apart to make a square four to six feet wide. These will provide the structural support needed to weave the bin.
2. Next, collect sticks and stalks and other prunings from the garden that will be used as walls for the bin. Big weeds, spent vegetable plants and flowers, trimmings from shrubs, old hay, grapevine, wisteria—almost anything will work.
3. Around the perimeter of the stakes, weave these collected materials together to make walls eight to ten inches thick.



4. Before adding organic materials into the compost bin, lay some stalks or sticks crisscross on top of each other on the ground in the center of the bin. This will allow air flow from the bottom of the pile to be drawn upward through the materials, enhancing breakdown.
5. Next, add food scraps (see Resources for more information) and garden clippings to the pile. Always remember to cover up any food scraps so as not to invite animals. Have a supply on hand of something dry like leaves, wood chips, straw, or shredded newspaper to layer in with your food scraps and cover the pile.

6. Keep the walls of the bin higher than the center at all times, so that nothing falls out. Once the bin is a few feet high, after a garden season, you can let it sit and start another. After a year or so, the interior of the bin left sitting will become dark compost, unrecognizable in origin, and ready to enrich your garden. The wall material will have partially broken down, but can be reinforced and re-used for a new bin.

Resources

Weaving

A Weaver's Garden by Rita Buchanan