

Baskets from the Woods

Jim Minick December 2, 2007 Roanoke Times New River Current

“This isn’t working,” Sarah my wife of astute intelligence kept reminding me as we discarded our fifth chunk of wood.

“Maybe we’re doing it wrong, maybe we need to try another tree,” I of astute optimism kept countering as I considered cutting a third sapling.

“No, not another tree, not until we figure this out.”

And having learned too many times already that Sarah is always right, I hoisted chainsaw into pickup and said no more.

We were trying to make bark baskets, by ourselves, for the first time. Sarah had just returned from a class in North Carolina where she learned how to select the right poplar tree, peel the bark, and score and fold it to make a container. It sounded easy enough, and the brilliant, lime green flush of May leaves meant the sap had risen, but something was amiss.

“In class we just slid a screwdriver under this edge, and you could hear the bark pop off,” Sarah reconsidered. “Maybe we’re too early. Maybe the sap isn’t up enough.”

I thought about hoisting another chunk onto the tailgate to give it another try, but my fingers already ached from too much prying, and this *was* supposed to be the easy part. We decided to wait two weeks, to let the sap rise more, before trying again.

For over a decade, Sarah has made all kinds of baskets—egg and market, pie and wine, wall pocket and key. Her workroom piles high with her weavings, coils of reed stacked on one side, finished baskets ready to sell on the other.

But she has always used bought material imported from far away. For a long time we both wondered what it would be like for her to work with our own material, bark and vines and splits we harvested from this farm.

So first, Sarah took a week-long class on making white oak baskets, starting with a log and splitting it into finer and finer strips. When she returned, we worked three long days hiking the logs out of the woods, striking the wedges and blades to rive the white wood into inch-wide strips. By the evening of that third day, our backs and arms ached, yet we had only rendered the materials for one, maybe two baskets. Sarah hadn't even started the weaving yet. Some year we'll probably return to this Cadillac of basket materials, but the day-upon-day of hard-on-hands labor has thwarted our enthusiasm for now.

Poplar-bark baskets seemed like a good alternative. They still could come from our own forest, from weak trees that needed thinning, and these vessels didn't sound like nearly as much labor as the white oak baskets.

If you got the timing right.

Two weeks after our initial fiasco, we returned to the poplar grove, felled another tree with a busted top, and cut it into two-foot chunks. Then came the prying off of bark. We slid the screwdriver along a scored edge, slowly lifted up, and heard the distinct pop. Ten seconds later, the bark completely separated from the log. The sound told us we had been too early before, and now our timing was perfect.

To form the bark into a container, Sarah scored the piece by making two shallow cuts in the shape of a football. Then she gently folded it inward, bending at the scores. The ends met to form a cylinder, an ancient shape mirrored by our modern French fry container.

We needed lacing and handles, however, and that required bark from a different tree, a hickory. Down came a small mockernut, again, one that crowded another healthier tree. Unlike poplars where we used the whole bark, on hickories we only wanted the inner layer, so this meant using a drawknife to peel off the outer bark, the shavings littering the ground. We scored the inner layer into long thin strips, pried them off the log, and then cut the coils to the right length and width for handles and lacing.

Like with the white oak work, we set aside three days to labor with these new materials from our own woods. But unlike that singular pile of white oak strips still unwoven into any basket, this time, in three days, the two of us created eighteen finished poplar bark baskets and set aside another fourteen to complete in winter.

When the sap is fully up next summer, we plan to do it all again. And Sarah's been reading about how to make handles out of grapevines. We might have to try that, too.