



Weaving together past and future in a basket

Out and about at this time of year, you may well have noticed the coloured stems of plants such as willow and dogwood in gardens, fields and hedgerows. While many of us are happy to enjoy them for their own sake, some of these plants are of economic importance too, since they provide the raw materials for making baskets.

There's a tradition of basketry which extends across the globe, and people have utilised indigenous, locally sourced plants for centuries. Archaeologists have even found evidence of baskets in Egypt which date from as early as 8,000BC.

So, in a modern world which seems to be disappearing under a flood of plastics, it's good to know that some craftspeople are making



The long tradition of basketry is being continued by a Norfolk craftsman, and around the globe, explains our gardening writer **Charlotte Philcox**.

a difference by continuing to work with sustainably sourced natural materials.

"Making baskets is like learning a musical instrument," says basket maker Jonathon Carrie of Norfolk Hedgerow Baskets. "It's all about technique - although it can be very hard on your hands when you first start. Each of my baskets has its own shape and texture, depending on the material used. I also try to recreate a range of baskets based on the ones which were once in common use on local farms, such as the bushel skep, pea picker, egg

collector and blackberry picker."

Jonathon grew up on a farm in south Norfolk, and can remember watching old craftsmen at work, as they made and repaired all kinds of baskets. He was also fascinated by the ways in which they transformed locally available plant material into items such as tool handles and walking sticks.

Today, Jonathon obtains his raw materials primarily from sustainably sourced local willow, which he uses with the bark still on as it gives the most natural appearance. He also incorporates

Some of the baskets made by Jonathon Carrie.



dogwood, hazel, field maple, larch and honeysuckle gathered from Norfolk hedgerows.

"There's nothing like going out for a walk on a lovely sunny day in winter," he says. "It's only then that you start to see all the colours nature provides."

He explains that most of his raw material is cut during the winter, from November to February when sap flow in the plants slows right down.

"Hazel and dogwood are especially beautiful, regenerate well, but can be difficult to work. Willow is my favourite, since it comes in so many different shades, and is strong and flexible. That's why it's been so popular with basket makers across the years."

In the past, despite the popularity of willow, the sturdiest working baskets were made from rattan and imported, including those used in mining and the fishing industry. This tropical plant was known to provide the strongest basket making material in the world, and was sourced and traded by the Chinese. A fast-growing climber, it is a type of palm, and can grow hundreds of feet into the canopy of

the rainforest.

Rattan is so tough and thorny that soldiers serving in the tropics knew it to be one of the worst plants they could encounter during manoeuvres. It's not surprising that they were warned to avoid it wherever possible. However, indigenous peoples have harvested it for centuries, removing the thorny bark to expose the central part of the plant, which can then be processed and prepared for use.

Emily Readett Bayley from Norfolk-run Planet Basket knows just how important rattan can be for those living in the tropical rainforests of Central Borneo. She works directly with the Dayak people, as part of the Katingan Project which was set up in 2009. As part of the project, 349,860 hectares of primarily virgin and inaccessible rainforest have been designated as an 'ecosystem restoration area', with the aim of working with the local communities who live around its edges, to carry out ecosystem restoration and protection.

"The rainforests have the highest levels of biodiversity in the world", says Emily. "Central Borneo contains one of the largest populations of wild orangutans, and there are also snow leopards. Yet there is huge pressure on the people who live there to burn and clear the land to grow plants for palm oil, bio-diesel and the cheap vegetable oils which are used in most of the processed foods we eat. This provides an almost instant income, but is colossally damaging to the environment, as after about 30 years of this treatment, both the



Jonathon Carrie in a hat made of rush he cut from the River Yare near Norwich.


“ Making baskets is like learning a musical instrument.”

rainforest and soil are completely ruined, not to mention the destruction of biodiversity, wildlife and people's livelihoods."

Emily explains how a series of weavers' workshops were established in the rainforest, to revitalise traditional basket making, and produce the large, tough and traditionally designed baskets which are now exported directly, and form a major part of the Planet Basket range.

"Environmental concerns play a big part in the making and distribution of the baskets," she says. "For example, we use the dark rattan which is normally considered as waste by the factories and when used alongside other natural, mixed shades, this gives each basket a unique colour and character. Unlike in traditional rattan processing, we don't use toxic chemicals or dyes, and to avoid transporting the raw canes thousands of miles to factories in Java or China, the baskets are made on site and shipped to the UK."

"The Dayak can now maintain their land rights and are able to harvest rattan without damaging the forest. After all, they are the ones who best know how to live sustainably in this environment."

So with care for the planet at the fore, whether it's among the rainforests of Borneo or the hedgerows of Norfolk, the tradition of basket making is one for which the future looks bright. 

During winter, Jonathon Carrie can be found on Fridays and Saturdays at his stall on Guildhall Hill in Norwich, or contact him via his website, norfolkhedge.co.uk You can find out more about Planet Basket at emilyreadettbayley.com