

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Garden plants provide food for our tables and pantries, and flowers to fill our vases. For basket makers, gardens and landscapes also provide the materials they use to weave beautiful and useful baskets. If you'd like to try making baskets from garden plants, plan now so you can allocate space and add a few basketry plants this year. You'll probably find that some are already growing in your yard.

Basket making is believed to be one of the most ancient crafts, practiced by early humans as far back as 10,000 B.C.E. Basketry artifacts from early civilizations have been discovered in archaeological sites all over the globe. On this continent, evidence found in Arizona and New Mexico indicates that Native American cultures were using baskets as molds for cooking vessels as early as 5,000 B.C.E.

Contemporary basket makers use leaves, stems, shoots, roots, bark, inner bark and strips of split wood in their work. Benefitting from eons of experimentation by our basket-making ancestors, basket makers today incorporate that cumulative knowledge of basketry skills with their own experiences and experimentation. The combined information helps them determine when to gather certain plant parts to gain the best quality material for crafting.

After collecting plant material, basket makers prepare it for storage and later use. Generally, they dry plant parts in a well-ventilated area, then moisten or soak the material to restore its pliability just before making the basket.

Basket makers use portions of many annual, perennial and bulb plants. The long, fibrous leaves of New Zealand flax, irises, daylilies, gladiolus, crocosmia, daffodils, cattails, and various ornamental grasses give basket makers excellent flat material for plaited, twined and coiled baskets. Stems and stalks of cattails, lavender, lily-of-the-Nile, wheat, millet, maidenhair fern and several other ferns are also used.

Vining plants provide round material for making wicker, coiled, twined and rib baskets. Wisteria, five-leaf akebia, grape, clematis, blackberry, raspberry, strawberry and periwinkle yield long, strong vines, canes or runners for baskets. Some of these plants produce vigorous growth and require a sturdy trellis or arbor to support them.

Ivies and honeysuckles also grow suitable vines for basketry, but if you plan to introduce them into your garden, select varieties carefully. Some types, such as English ivy and Japanese honeysuckle, are invasive; English ivy is also listed as a Class C noxious weed in Washington State. (See the resources at the end of this article for the noxious weed Web site address.)

Several shrubs produce long, slender shoots (sometimes called withes) that crafters prize for their combination of strength and flexibility. Basket makers cultivate several varieties of shrubby basket willows. However, willows have vigorous root systems that can become invasive, and therefore are not the best candidates for small, tidy gardens. Redtwig dogwood is another shrub that produces colorful shoots for basketry, but it too can be invasive, spreading by underground stems and rooting branches. The shoots of ceanothus, twigs of lilac bushes and leaf stems of Japanese aralia are used by some basket makers.

Trees are rich sources of basketry materials. Basket makers often use long pine needles to form the core of coiled baskets. They also gather roots, leaf stems and bark from various trees. Felled trees, such as certain species of ash, oak, cottonwood, maple, pine and yew, provide thin splints or splits, which basket makers peel lengthwise from the annual rings of the wood.

The leaves of several houseplants make good basket material, including cast-iron plant, spider plant, ti plant, ponytail plant and snake plant. Even vegetable garden by- products, such as corn husks, artichoke leaves and lima bean vines, are woven into baskets.

When harvesting basketry material, follow recommended pruning and horticultural practices for individual plants to keep them healthy and attractive. Be careful not to remove an excessive amount of live material from perennial or woody plants.

There are many good books, articles and Web sites that provide specific, detailed information about gathering materials, preparing them and making baskets. Visit [www.basketmakers.org](http://www.basketmakers.org) to find basket-making information, resources and links to other sites; the site includes a page on growing a basket garden. For information on regional basket-making classes and events, visit the site of the Northwest Basket Weavers at [www.nwbasketweavers.org](http://www.nwbasketweavers.org).

For more information about noxious weed lists and regulations, see the Web site of the Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board at [www.nwcb.wa.gov](http://www.nwcb.wa.gov). In addition to English ivy, certain species of iris, grains and grasses appear on the noxious weed lists.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

