

# Passing on the tradition of basket making

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Among the Six Nation Tribes of the United States and Canada, a particular type of lidded basket is woven with material from the ash tree. Unlike most contemporary basket makers, Native-American basket weavers consider the assembling and preparation of materials, along with the accompanying prayers and rituals, as important as the weaving of the basket itself.

To begin a basket, a newly fallen or felled ash tree is chosen and stripped of the bark. The exposed wood is beaten with mallets to soften and separate the fibers. When the surface shows signs of loosening, long strips are pulled off and the process starts over until all the usable material has been gathered. The pieces are trimmed so they are all equal in width.

After the green wood has cured, the pieces are soaked so they become malleable and dyed if the basket pattern is incorporating color. Then the weaver can begin the construction of the basket.

The process of preparing the materials is physically demanding and calls for excellent hand strength. One well-known weaver nearing 90 was asked why she still was making baskets. She answered that she wanted to carry on a tradition her daughters weren't interested in learning. She subsequently asked her grandson to help her fell the trees and pull the strips. In time he became curious and began to learn the weaving process for himself.

As with most arts, the learning process takes much time and patience. Sometimes years of experience are required to accomplish the mastery of a particular art form. Due to the mass-produced and imported imitations of Native-American arts, many families are no longer able to make a living producing their art at home. Children are growing up without close contact to the elders and artists within the tribe, losing not only instruction but participation in the culture and language.

Katie Sickles is the Oneida basket weaver mentioned above and her grandson is now an accomplished basket maker also. Their baskets are shown below and are known as strawberry baskets due to the twisted design. The red basket is Katie's and the white one was made by her grandson. Now she can retire with a clear conscience. Her art has been passed on and Katie's baskets are very collectible strawberries.

