



Bodéwadmí Gokpenagenen

Potawatomi Baskets

Our people are known for their skill in creating black ash baskets. Basket making is an old form of art, born out of the necessity for carrying and holding objects. Baskets would be made differently depending on their use. Some examples would be berry baskets, market baskets, bread baskets, or laundry baskets. The beauty is inherent in our baskets. In modern times, basket makers have made more decorative baskets that resemble such things as a strawberry, acorns, flowers, or an ear of corn. Many use artificial dyes to achieve bright colors that grab the attention of a potential buyer. Each basket maker has their own unique style of making baskets; bold color choices, curly cues, handles, or checkerboard weaving styles. Some add sweetgrass to the rim or birch bark to the body of the basket. Many of us have a favorite basket at home.

Our tradition of basket making is one of the oldest that we practice, and truly is a part of our identity as Potawatomi. In the 1980's, the Basket Co-op was started by a group of people who all came from basket making families. We thought it would be nice to have the basket co-op share some of their knowledge today with tribal members who may never have had the pleasure of making their own basket. With this handout, you can learn a little about the history of basket making, the process of harvesting and working a tree, and some language related to baskets. But there is nothing like getting a splint in your hands and creating your own basket. It allows you to be a part of something as old as our people are.

The process starts in the marsh, by identifying a good black ash. A good tree is one that is straight as an arrow at least 12 feet up, with a tight grove pattern in the bark. A small chunk is taken from the bottom of the tree to insure that you have a tree with an even growth pattern. After chopping the tree down, you get as many six-foot sections of log out of the tree as you can. When the tree is hauled out of the woods, you strip the bark and begin pounding the log with a hammer or axe. You have to make sure not to pound on any one part too much, and as you pound, each year's growth ring will begin to pull up. These growth rings are taken and split again. They will have one rough side and one smooth side. The rough side is scraped with a knife until smooth, and now you have a splint. These splints are what is used to weave a basket. The outer wood is a nice and white, the heartwood has a deeper brown tone and can be used for weavers or handles. You can dye the splints or work them natural. Under the guidance of an experienced basket maker, you are ready to weave your own basket!

Everyone loves to make a basket, but not always the harvesting or working of the tree. The men usually will do this, and provide the strips for the women to smooth and make baskets. Our area is blessed with an abundance of ash trees. But, this tree and our traditions are in danger due to the Emerald Ash Borer. This bug is slowly killing off the ash population, and without finding a solution, there may come a time when our children won't be able to make a basket.



Baskets ready for sale, ca. 1940s



'Miniature' baskets made by Judy Augusta

Potawatomi Language

- Forest
- Marsh
- Tree
- Bark
- Axe
- Hammer
- Scissors
- Knife
- Black Ash Tree or splints
- Pounding the black ash log
- Birch bark
- Sweetgrass
- Strawberry
- Blueberries
- Basket
- Black Ash Basket
- Gift

Bodéwadmi Mwen

- mtegwakik**
- wabshkekek**
- mteg**
- negek**
- gemsagen**
- gadjekes**
- mozhwagen**
- koman**
- wisgat**
- bapanegwish**
- wigwas**
- wishpemishkos**
- démen**
- minen**
- gokpenagen**
- wisgat gokpenagen**
- mingoswen**