

Coiling

The Art Of Basket Making

There are as many different ways of making baskets as there are materials. Coiling is one of them. It is a very old basket making technique that has been used over time by many cultures and for many different uses. Due to its simplicity it was probably developed by different cultures at the same time.

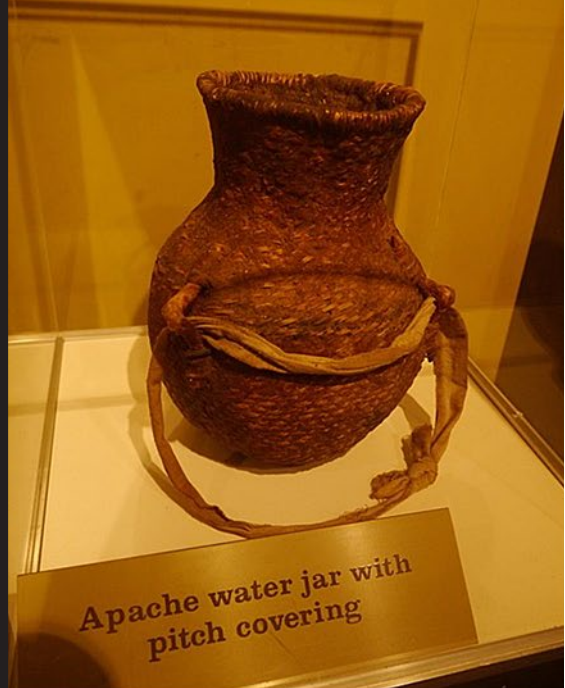
Anyway, the great thing about coiling is that you can use a really big variety of materials that enables you to adapt to the material at hand. And even better, by coiling a basket you have almost every freedom in the design. Maybe this is why this technique is so widely used around the world for so many applications in all shapes and sizes. Even water bottles and granaries have been 'coiled'.



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The M'bunza in the North of Namibia use coiling to make huge granaries.



This water bottle has been coiled and pitched by the Apaches (Gila Mountains, New Mexico).

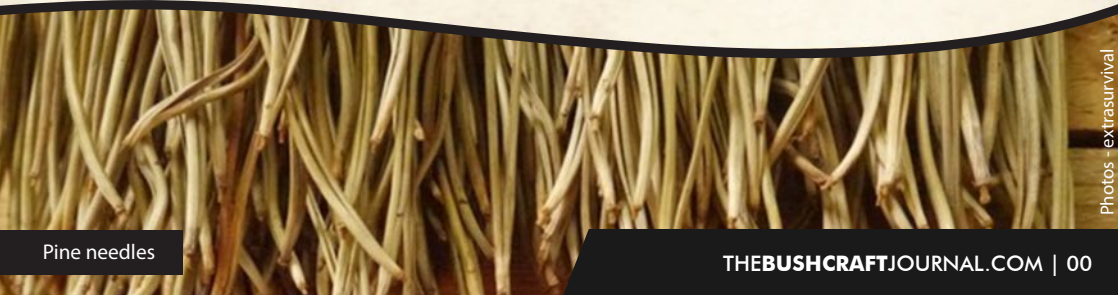
Materials

Before taking you step by step through the process of coiling, I would like to give you an idea about the materials you could use. Almost anything that is long and pliable enough to bend without breaking can be used as a core. Rushes are great, cattail leaves, pine needles, bulrush and soft rush works perfect, even grasses, hay and grain stalks.

For the binding material you need something strong and as long as possible. To start your first basket with some kind of thread works fine. Natural alternatives would be all sorts of bark (willow, elm, lime, poplar), nettle thread, cattail leaves, rootlets.

It is important that all materials are dried before you use them. Fresh green materials will look great while working on the project but will shrink afterwards so much that you will end up with a horrible wobbly basket. To get the best and strongest materials you need to harvest them while still green and have them dried somewhere air ventilated and spread out. If you gather them already dry they are dead and will break much easier. Be sure you have enough; there is more material needed in baskets than you expect.

Additionally you will need a strong needle or an awl, a pair of scissors and a gauge.



Pine needles

The Technique

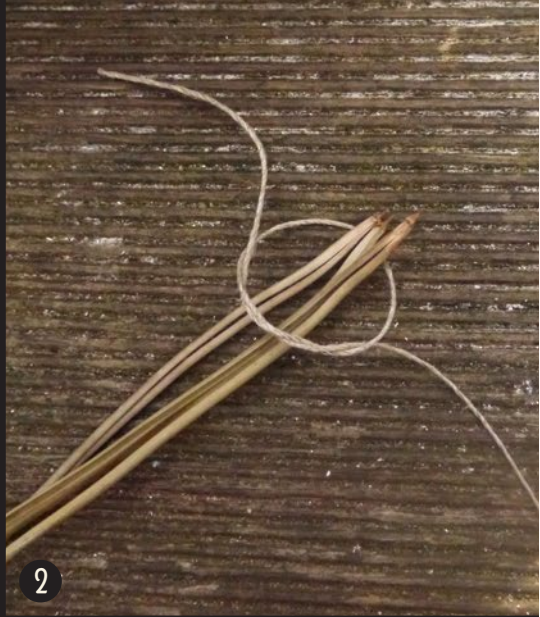
1 The first thing is to re-soak all your material. For most rushes, cattail and grasses this will only take a few minutes. You can either dip them in a bucket of water or use damp towels wrapped around the rushes. Be aware to not over soak them! If there is too much water in the fibres you will get a similar result as with green materials.

2 To start with the coiling you will need a few rushes or pine needles, or what ever you're going to use as core material. And a long strip of your threading material. In the example I use hemp thread and pine needles.

Place the core material in a bundle and create a simple overhand knot with the thread and pull tight.

3 Wrap the long end of your thread around the core bundle until you have about 5 cm. Get the thread fixed by half of a clove hitch.

Trim the overhanging bit at the end of your bundle close to the wrapping.



4 Now the actual coiling can start. Therefore you will need either a strong needle or an awl depending on your threading material. In the example I use a common thread which can be used with a needle. If you use natural threading like bark you will need an awl (*see 'tips'*).

Try to roll up the part of the core that has been wrapped. This might be quite an unpleasant step because it tends to unwind as soon as you let go. But keep trying! Once you have managed to get the core rolled up in a circle, quickly wrap the thread a few times around it to get it fixed. You can also stitch a few times somewhere through the wrapped part of the core. It doesn't need to look nice right now as long as it gets fixed in a circle.

Start coiling.

It is as simple as stitching through the previous row (and at the beginning, through the centre part as often as needed) and around the core. I prefer to have the still-to-use part of the core to my left while I stitch with my right hand.

Try to get the stitches as even as possible. The pattern you set up with the first few rows of stitches will be taken through the whole basket. This means uneven stitches at the beginning will make an unevenly stitched basket.



5

The spiral stitch:

Through all different cultures there are many ways of stitching. I use the spiral stitch in this example.

Every stitch will go through a few fibers of the previous row as well as under the thread of that stitch in the previous row.

5

This shows the stitch and not the current stage you should be at!





6 Once you have the first stitches and turns you can enlarge your core up to the desired thickness (this depends on the purpose and size of your basket). Every now and then add a fibre to the core by pushing it carefully in between the already existing core.

If you like you can work with a gauge to make sure the core will be the same thickness throughout your whole basket. This gauge can be anything that has the diameter you wish. I often use the plastic housing of an old marker cut in pieces. Something more natural is a piece of bird bone as you see in this picture above.



7 Keep coiling this way. Make sure you place the rows nicely on top of each other and stitch straight through the previous row to get a platform instead of a bowl. Work as tightly as possible to get a firm basket. You will need to add fibers every now and then to keep the core evenly thick.

8 If you need to add thread, the easiest way is to weave the end back down a few rows and start with the new thread the other way weaving upwards.

9 You might come to a point that the stitches will get too far apart (as the circle increases with every row). You can add extra stitches by inserting one stitch in between every existing one. Keep adding until you've finished the row.

You might also add single stitches whenever needed, in the same way.

10 Once you are ready to work upwards to create the sides of your basket you need to place the core 'upwards' instead of straight on top of the previous row. At the same time you place your stitch at an angle from below through the previous row.

Pictured are some possibilities to shape your basket.

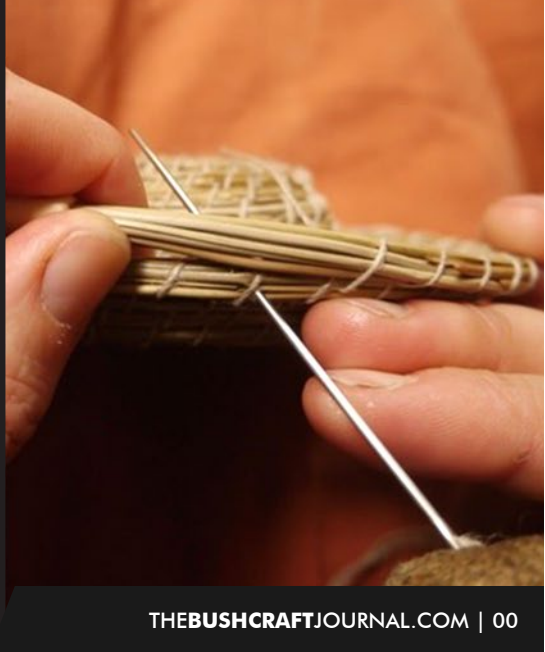
If you want to coil straight in the same direction as the previous rows, place the core on top of the previous one and stitch at a straight angle through the previous row.



If you want to coil towards you, place the core slightly a side towards yourself and stitch at an angle from below upwards through the previous row.



To bend the basket away from you, place the core slightly downwards and stitch at an angle from above downwards through the previous row.



Using these techniques you can shape your basket in almost any direction. The more you bend the core, the sharper the curve will be.



11 Once you have the desired curve, again place the coils straight on top of each other in order to get the sides straight up (if you wish them to be straight).



12 When your basket is big enough you should work the last coil nice and without any fibres sticking out. Stop adding fibres to the core, which makes it thinner after a while. If needed you may cut the fibres to end quicker. Do so at the inside of the core so it will not be seen afterwards.

13 To reinforce the rim of your basket you may stitch backwards creating an X X X pattern.

14 If you wish you can coil a lid for your basket starting at point 1 again.

Tips

Using natural thread you most likely will need an awl. An awl needs a slightly different approach. Push the awl through a few fibres of the previous row and under the stitch in that previous row. You will need to push it through as far as needed to be able to push your threading material through the awl. Pull the 'thread' through and take out the awl.

Tips

Pine needle preparing:

You need a type of pine with long needles (preferably 15 – 20 cm). The best pine needles are the green ones picked from the branches. If you don't want to damage the tree you can use fallen branches. Then dry the needles, they will stay light green. Soak the needles in boiling water for 30 minutes. Wrap them in a towel and start to pull off the cap of every needle. This works best with your fingers. Try to leave the needle intact.

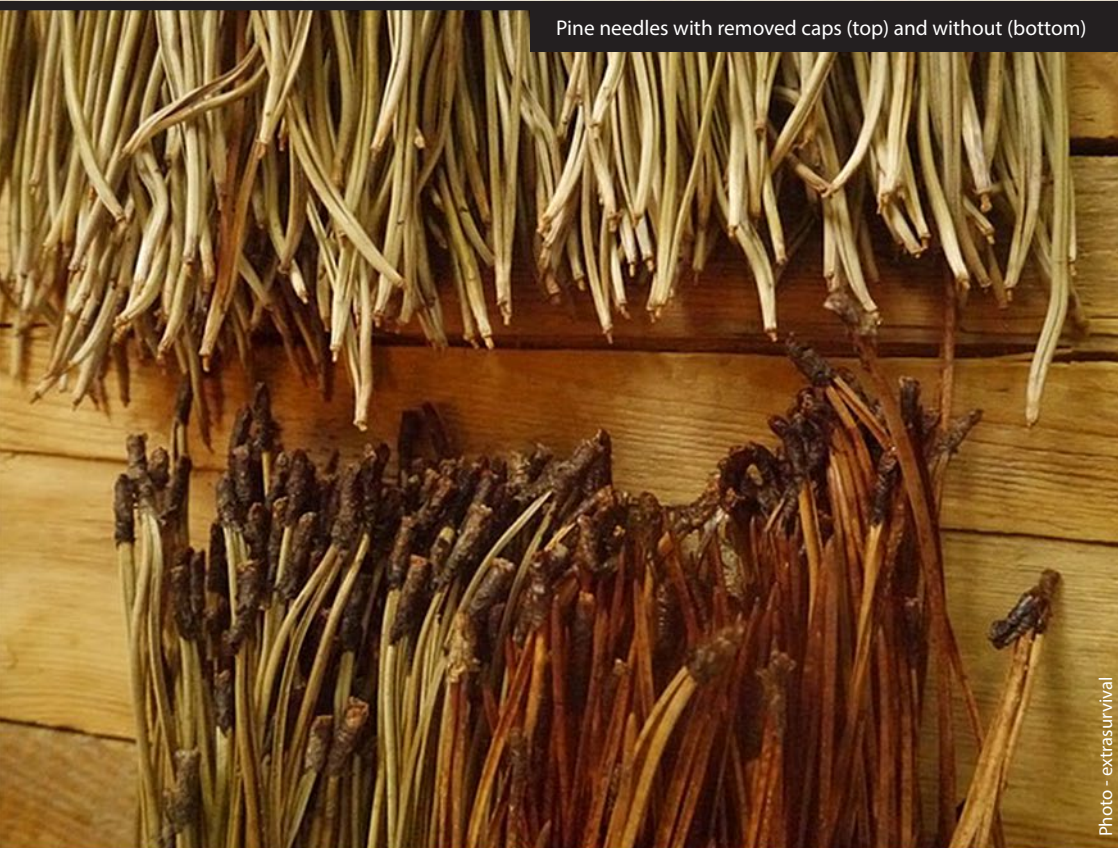
Soak a small bundle of needles again just before starting the basket. The first turns of your basket will need wet needles otherwise they break at the tight curve. Once you get a wider curve use dry needles, this will make a firmer basket.

Preparing cattail leaves:

Gather the leaves while still green, best time is before the plant has a cone stalk. Make small loose bundles and hang them to dry in an airy place. This way the containing jelly will stay within the leaf which makes it less brittle. Cattail leaves only need a quick soaking.

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You can make an awl from bird bones or the housing of a marker. Be sure it is not too big for the size of your basket and has no sharp edges (as they will cut your fibres).



Pine needles with removed caps (top) and without (bottom)

Photo - extrasurvival

Problems & Solutions

There are not many possibilities to get problems because the method is simple. Nevertheless, there are a few which can be really annoying.

- If your basket gets too flexible you might have been working too loose. There is no way of getting a basket firm afterwards, sorry. The only option is to start over again and work tighter this time.
- If you've worked tight but still the result is a wobbly basket the material was not entirely dried before re-soaking. Or you soaked it too long.
- If the shape does not become what you had in mind you did something wrong with the angle of your core and stitch relative to your basket. See point 10.

Shapes & Patterns

Be creative, almost everything is possible when it comes to coiling. Some examples below.





The Mabunza have beautiful patterns and designs.

Have fun and be aware: this is addictive!

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