



## #1: Brown Ash Tree finder and Pounder

Brown Ash (*Fraxinus Nigra*) is a very common tree in Maine and the primary material in making Penobscot baskets. It grows on the banks of streams and rivers as well as in bogs and in swamps. It grows in rich, wet soils and reaches a height of 50 to 60 feet tall and 10 to 20 inches in diameter.

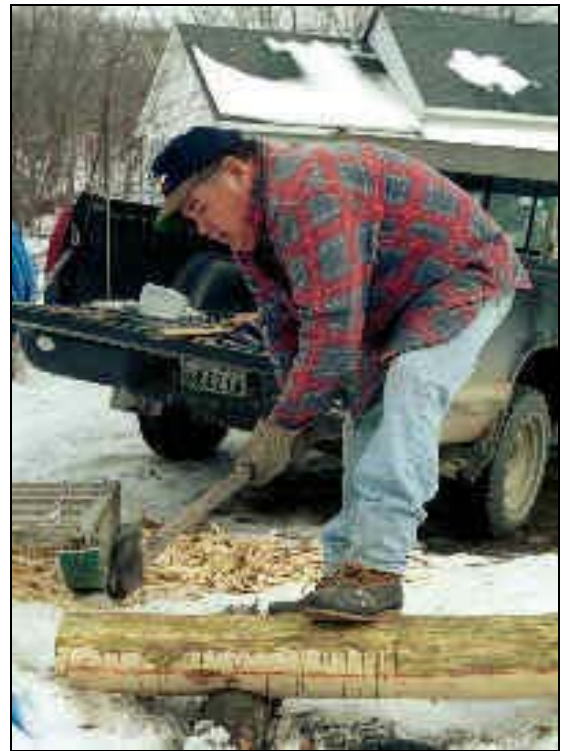
Brown ash is used in both work and fancy baskets. Traditionally, the men would harvest the ash. They would travel streams and rivers looking for ash trees that have a straight run between 8 and 10 feet in length. The diameter should be between 6 and 12 inches. A log with these dimensions would weigh about 100 pounds.

The ash tree is cut down, de-limbed, and then the bark is removed.



The ash log is then pounded with the back of an ax or some sort of sledge hammer. Traditionally, a stone sledge, or a

hard wooden mallet would have been used. The log is frequently moistened with a mixture of water and ashes while it is being pounded. The pounding causes the wood to separate along its annual ring growth. These separations are called splints and are the raw material used to weave work baskets, such as pack and potato baskets, or with additional preparation may be used in making more delicate fancy baskets.



Marty Francis pounding ash on Indian Island. Photo by Jim Sharkey.

1) Brown Ash Tree Finder & Pounder  
While you're walking in the woods or on the river in a canoe, you also keep a lookout for Brown Ash trees.

When you find one or some trees, you harvest them. You cut them down and cut of an 8 foot log.

When you get home, you remove the bark off the tree with a draw shave tool. Then you start to pound it with a 3 pound axe going lengthwise, up and down, until the growth rings separate into splints.

When you have finished pounding the ash tree, you take the splints to the person who does the splitting and scraping.

Go to the photo of a brown ash tree at our supply station. Below the photo are strips of cards stock paper to represent brown ash. Collect 8 of these for each member of your group. Share 5 facts about the process of finding and pounding ash trees with your group. Do not hand the strips out to all members of the group. Instead, give them to the person who has the second job, splitting, scraping and gauging.

## Splitting, Scraping, and Gauging

Once someone has harvested the ash and pounded it into splints the next step is to split and/or scrape the ash. Splitting and scraping determines the thickness of the ash splints. Thick splints are stronger and are used when making pack baskets, potato baskets or some other work basket. More delicate baskets, like fancy baskets, require thinner splints.

Depending on how thick the splints are it may not be necessary to split the ash. Unusually when making work baskets only scraping is necessary. Scraping the ash is done to remove the roughness of the splints.



Scraping

Scraping is done by placing a piece of leather on the scraper's leg and drawing the ash splint between the leather and a hand held blade. The blade will shave off small layers of the ash leaving a smoother surface. Fancy baskets may require both splitting and

scraping. You will want a thin, smooth splint for fancy baskets.



An ash splitter is a tool used to split ash.

Splitting the ash is a skill that has to be mastered. Equal pressure must be used when using the ash splitter to ensure that the splints have a consistent thickness. Splitting the ash will give you one smooth side and one rough side. For fancy baskets, which need two smooth sides, the splints must be “double split.”



Lawrence “Billy” Shay using the ash splitter

When you are making fancy baskets the splints need to be very thin and smooth for making curls and twists.

Once the splints are the desired thickness they are then gauged for width. Gauging involves using a tool with small blades to cut the ash splints into the desired widths. The tool has more than one blade to save time.



Gauging the ash.

Gauging is a time consuming that requires patients and skill to get high quality splints for fancy baskets.

Work baskets will require splints with wider widths and some fancy baskets will require widths as small as 1/32nd of inch.

Gauges come in many sizes due to the width desired. These tools are hand made and often traded in the community.



A gauge.

The quality of ash is a factor today. The quality has declined over the years due to the ash becoming “pock marked”. These pock marks will cause the splints to break, split, or have inconsistencies. These imperfections may be due to acid rain or other pollutants affecting the trees growth.



Gauges come in many shapes and sizes.

High quality splints that have been split, scraped, and gauged are a must to produce the highly sought after Penobscot Fancy Basket.

This is an important job in the economics of basket making.

## Splitter and Gauger

You are talented at splitting a 2 inch wide growth ring (splint) in half.

After you split each splint, you take your knife and scrape it smooth.

When you are all done scraping, you have a good idea what each growth ring would be good for. They could be used as:

- Standards- pieces of a basket around which you weave
- Weavers- pieces of a basket that move over and under the standards
- Binders- think pieces of ash used to make the top row of a basket and hold it all together.

You can also tell if they are good for fancy baskets which are more delicate or work baskets which are sturdier.

So, you take the right size gauge (sharp cutting tool) and hand-gauge each splint.

When you finish gauging, you carefully roll up each prepared growth ring and take them to your work room.

Take the cared stock strips from the finder/pounder. Fold them in half and cut them to a taper (narrow ending) on the edge. While you do this tell your group 5 facts you learned about splitting and gauging ash including information about different uses for splints.

## Sweet grass Gathering

### #3 Gathering Sweet grass

Sweet grass, (*Hierochloe Odorata*), is a fragrant, salt marsh grass that is used in Maine Indian basket making. The grass has a soft sweet scent that becomes more fragrant on rainy days.

It is very hard to find sweet grass today. In those areas where there is sweet grass the locations are kept secret. Sweet grass is also burned and used in ceremony.

The grass is picked, gathered into bundles and then hung to dry. In the picture below the grass bundles are hanging on a line to dry.

You know where the best sweetgrass growing spots are.

You've been picking grass for as long a time as your ancestors have. Your family taught you the trade and the locations of the best grass. They taught you how to harvest the grass and how to dry it.

When you have finished:

- Picking
- Combing
- Drying
- Wrapping for storage

You then take the sweetgrass to the braiders.

Go to the photo of sweetgrass. Below it is yarn that will represent sweetgrass. Gather 3 strands for each person in your group. While you pass these strands to the braider, share 3 facts you learned about gathering sweetgrass with your group.



#### #4 Sweet grass braiding



This is a section of a painting by Michael E. Vermette, Indian Island School art teacher that shows a tribal member braiding sweet



Sweet grass comb

Special wooden combs are used to clean the chaff from the grass. Before it is used, it is soaked in water to make it soft and pliable. The grass can be woven in a couple strands at a time or it can be braided.

#### Braiding Sweet Grass

Braiding sweet grass involves taking individual strands of grass and braiding

them together. The strands of grass are different lengths when braiding and grass is added in continuously. By doing this you have a long rope of braided sweet grass.

Many braiders use the back of a chair to wrap the finished braid around. The seat of the chair holds the bundle of sweet grass, usually wrapped in newspaper. The braids are created so quickly that the sweet grass “sings” as the blades move through the air.

These braids are used in making many fancy baskets.

You have been braiding sweetgrass for a longtime. Your fingers are so quick and nimble that the grass sings as you braid the blades together. This braided grass is used to make fancy baskets.

The longer one braids sweetgrass, the faster one gets. The older people said that one can hear the grass sing as the grass is braided.

You braid it into a hank of a continuous braid 100 yards long.

When you have a couple of these hanks, you take them to the weaver.

Take the strands of ‘sweetgrass’ (yarn) from the picker. Braid one strand for each member of your group. as you braid, share 3 facts about your job with the group.



## #5 Basket Weaver

Basket weavers are the final step in the long process involved in creating baskets. Weavers must choose their materials. Ash comes in various shades. Many weavers like the 'two-toned' effect of choosing some splints from the outside of the ash and some from the inside or the 'heartwood' of the tree that are much darker than the rest. Ash splints can also be dyed a variety of colors. The shape and style of the basket is determined by the weaver to meet the needs of their community or the person buying it.

Baskets are woven from the bottom up. The bottom is formed by separating the splints into a shape (usually circular) of standards. The weaving of the weaver splints over and under the standards shapes the bottom. A good weaver must be careful to skip a standard at the beginning of each row. This pattern is necessary to get a true weave and makes a beautiful shape known as the 'circle of life' on the inside of the basket. As the weaver checks his/her size, he/she gets ready to move to the sides of the basket.



A weaver knows what size and shape to make the basket based upon molds/blocks that are used.



These are wooden pieces that allow the basket splints to mold and take shape. The weaver periodically checks his/her size and shape and often wets the standards to fit the mold. These molds/blocks are often handed down from generation to generation and when bought new can cost 40.00.

The design can be as fancy as the weaver chooses. Often, a weaver will add a

braid or a few pieces of sweetgrass to the weaving and incorporate the sweetgrass into the same over/under pattern around the standards. A weaver may also wet and shape thinner weavers into fancy shapes.



When the weaver is satisfied with the bottom and sides of the basket, he/she will end the basket with a thicker standard that is bound tightly.



Then she/he begins the task of making the cover of the basket. It must fit just right or the lid will not stay on which is a common mistake of a new basketmaker. Great attention is paid to the top of the

basket because that is the piece that is almost always visible.

When a basket is complete, many things can be done with it. It can be displayed in a store and bought by a customer. Often times a basket is custom made for a customer. The money that is paid is shared amongst the many people who contributed to a basket, or the Basketmaker has compensated the people who contributed to the making to the basket through barter or trade. Baskets are also often displayed in a gallery or museum as well. Basketmakers can enter their baskets into competitions too. A typical basket takes 4 hours to make and an average basket sells for 100.00.

People all over the world want baskets and respect basketmakers because basket making is a dying tradition. However, Penobscot basketmakers are trying hard to teach the many jobs involved in making baskets to the next generation so that they can carry it on. Basketmaking began in order to make baskets that had a specific purpose in daily life. Now baskets are not only used as functional objects, but are beautiful pieces of art for all to enjoy. For the weavers and all who are involved in the process, basketmaking is a way to be rooted in the traditions lifeways of the Penobscot Indians.

You are now ready to weave a basket. You first practiced with the scraps of ash from your elders prepared ash. You made bookmarks and candy baskets. Now you make fancy baskets with curls and points and bright colors and finely braided sweetgrass. People from all over want your baskets because this is a dying tradition. You use the molds/blocks that have been passed down from generation to generation. After you make your basket you display it in a shop, gallery, museum or a store. The money you make will be used to buy more basket making supplies. You have now learned the art of making a basket.

Go to the supply center and get a color coded direction Sheet for your group. While you do this, share 5 pieces of information you learned from your resource sheet. Be sure all group members have the materials they need and Begin weaving!

