

**Interview with Gwen Yeaman (Ottawa, Penobscot)  
Clermont, Indiana (Indianapolis)  
Dani Tippman and Mike Gonella  
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General Notes on Fiber Plants

- Harvesting bark of trees spring to early summer—if too late the bark won't come off. Best to try it and learn—you'll never forget!
- Bark of the trees like basswood and poplar are more important near Great Lakes where they grow/grew prolifically, like northern IN and around MI. Plants more important in southern areas like central IN and OH.
- The conditions the plants are growing in are important as far as their qualities go: ease of removal of bark, fiber length/quality, taste of food from that plant. You'll learn this as you harvest and try the same plants from different areas, wetter/drier, etc.

Respect for Plants

- Plants have taught her many things—they know things that we learn by working directly with them, with our hands. They have powerful lessons to share.
- She encouraged camp activities (for this summer) with kids where they get to know plants by interacting with them first and forget the names/labels. Have them come up with their own names—to emphasize relationships first, a personal relationship.
- Forming a relationship with the plant is primary. A give and take.
- General rule of thumb is to harvest only some of the elders, young ones of a group of a kind of plant; don't take it all.

Basswood (bark fibers)

- Harvesting:
  - easiest to take the whole tree when harvesting. Technically, if you take less than 1/3 of bark and the tree can still live, but then bugs will get to it and it will die anyways, and slowly. She takes the whole tree.
  - Score across the diameter of the bottom of the tree, before bark/grain spreads out towards ground and is not straight, about a strip 6" or so wide (depends on tree/time of year for ease of removal, different widths for different diameter trees, too). Score up the tree as far as you can before grain starts to twist or there's a limb in the way—do this on both sides, forming a long rectangle with a cross score on the top too. She uses a carpet knife.
  - Peel off from bottom up, sometimes having to really pull hard to strip a piece of bark off a tree at the top, almost hanging on it at times.
  - Best done in spring, a couple of months of a window, while soil is still moist and sap is running. This year she said about early June, July; later this year because it's been so wet (I think meaning you could harvest longer since it stayed wetter and cooler longer, somewhat prolonging late winter).

- Coil up.
- Use:
  - Soak in water
  - Pull into workable strips, and work with it to release fibers from bark and from each other. The more separate, but loosely connected, the individual fibers, the more surface area there is for each fiber to grab onto the other when made into cordage, and the better it will twist and the stronger the cordage will be.
  - Choose a bundle of loosened fibers the right size to make the thickness cordage you want. She said I could use just a little to make thread or up to bundle about ½ the thickness of my pinky (very general estimate) and twist with that.
  - Add in new pieces as a new V into the V being twisted
  - The most important thing in making rope/cordage is that you add in pieces that will maintain the existing diameter/thickness of the piece you started with. The more uniform the thickness along the length of the cordage, the stronger it is and better it will work on certain things.
    - For lashing, etc., general tasks bumps and knots will not be a big problem—it can be varying diameter
    - For bows, thread, baskets, etc, you'll want to make the diameter very uniform, or it won't serve its function in the end product
- Distribution:
  - Gwen said basswood was a major cordage material around the great lakes, meaning closer to them like in northern Indiana, Michigan, etc., along with Poplar. She said where we were, Indy or southern IN or Ohio, where the basswood was not as prevalent, the fiber plants were not trees as much as they were the wolfbane and milkweed
  - One of major sources of fibers, and can be strongest if woven tight enough. Used by all the people that had that tree in their environment.

### Dogbane (=wolfbane)

- She harvests in the fall after the seeds open, to make sure 'babies' are released
- Some people don't collect at all, because of its medicine; it can cause heart problems, and can be good for some.
- Can use the stalks after it overwinters a year but its not as pliable
- She looks for the red stems that are less than a year old, for harvesting
- Medicine/toxicity

### Elm

- Bark smells sweet, maple-like to me

- Can fold elm bark strips, removed much the same as basswood but much harder, thicker to remove.
- Score with two crescent shapes, facing each other “()” on bottom/outside of a long rectangular strip, then fold it up, the “()” becoming the base. Sides naturally fold up on each other and you can encourage them to fold together for a better seam/seal. Done best when wet.
- She’s made ‘makuks’, bucket-like vessels from this bark, and birch, for holding seeds/fruits when gathering, etc. Also made baby rattle with smaller portions of bark that roll into cylinder and putt corn inside to rattle. She was making some of these currently.

### Birch

- Bark is waxy, resists soaking, that’s why it's good for water/canoes.
- Gwen has helped make a full-sized birch bark canoe.
- Need to heat bark to work with it, for weaving or bending into a ‘makuk’, like with a blow dryer or passing over a fire, since can’t soak it for pliability, need to heat it
- She’s also helped make dugout canoes

### Bulrush

- Great bulrush (softstem) great for weaving mats, nice long leaves
- Has taught mat weaving and can do that again for us
- Daryl and her harvested lots of it at Prophetstown

### Milkweed

- has finest hairs just on outside of cambium, like silk, make a beautiful thread

### Mulberry

- cordage also good, but not as refined as basswood
- but grows quickly (used as windbreak for that reason), so if someone wanted some cordage fibers quickly, they could harvest it right outside their door in a windbreak, like in a prairie village.
- She probably has miles of it

### Also Good Fiber Trees

- Hickory
- Tulip poplar
- Red Cedar
- Pawpaw (bark – fibers)

- Leatherwood (OK)

#### Her Basketry Collection/Etc.

- She relayed the story of a bag a client found in her basement that turned out to be a bag carried by a man that fought with Tecumseh, worth \$110,000. She put together its history and got it featured on the cover of Christi's magazine.
- She showed us many of her pieces, baskets she'd woven throughout the years. In many cases she had an old one/original and just studied it, let it teach her how to make another like itself, working with it for months, years to finish.
- She learned a lot of her early designs/techniques from Shaker baskets, because their designs hadn't changed for a century or two, and they got many of their designs from the native people.
- Made many pieces for museums. Never made more than one usually—not an assembly line because it took so long. Each one, usually, commissioned individually.