

The Dynamics and Practice of Freehand Shaping

By Judith Olney

Making an evenly shaped basket involves a great deal more than hand movement.

Part 1: Choosing the Correct Weight Materials

Shaping begins with choice of materials. The stakes must be the correct weight (thickness and stiffness) for the size and proposed use of the basket. Weavers are usually thinner and more flexible than the stakes, but not so thin and flexible as to be overwhelmed by the strength of the stakes. As a general rule, the smaller the spaces between the stakes are, the thinner and more flexible the weaver should be. When the spaces between the stakes are large, strong and thicker weavers are required to hold the stakes in place and maintain the shape of the basket.

Shaping continues in the mind of the basketmaker. Good shaping demands knowing and understanding what determines shape and how the elements used in constructing the basket interact to produce the conditions necessary to achieve a desired shape.

Part 2: Making the Spaces Even

Shape has two components: the position of the stakes and the size of the spaces between them. If you have chosen your stakes carefully they should be equal to each other in their widths and weight. The variable in the shape of a basket is the spaces between the stakes. When the spaces are kept even throughout the weaving process, the resulting basket will be evenly shaped. When the spaces are closer on one side of the basket and correspondingly farther apart on another, a curved basket will have bulges and flat places; a flared basket will list to one side. Closely spaced stakes turn upward and change direction much more readily than stakes with distance between them. No amount of adjustment to the finished basket can ever make a basket with unevenly spaced stakes appear well shaped. Evenly maintained spaces in combination with properly conceived and executed weaving techniques produce well shaped baskets.

Part 3: Rows of Weaving Should Touch Each Other

Correct weaving for shape has its own particular mind set. Throughout the weaving of any basket, think of placing each stake in its proper position then placing the weaver on the stake in such a way as to hold it in that position. To do this it is necessary to understand how weavers hold stakes in place. Twining holds stakes the best of all weaves because the two twinners "lock" as they pass each other traveling in and out between each stake. The over/under strokes of plain weave do not lock the stakes in place. The ability of plain weave to hold stakes in place can be enhanced by carefully making certain that each weaver touches the previous weaver every time it passes in or out between the stakes. That touch is the closest over/under weaving can come to the "lock" of twining. When a weaver does not touch the existing weaving, the stakes are not necessarily held in place: they, and the entire basket, can easily become distorted. Because the weaver passes over and under groups of stakes in twill weaves, the need for it to touch the previous weaving becomes even more critical.

Part 4: Don't Pull That Weaver!

It is rarely, if ever, necessary or useful to pull on a weaver to achieve a change of direction while weaving a basket. The forces that result from pulling on a weaver are much too variable to be consistent with precise shaping techniques. The degree of dampness in both the stakes and the weaver, the amount of space between the stakes, and the type of weave being used all influence the distance tension from a pull can travel around a basket. If both the stakes and weaver are fairly dry and there is space between the stakes, a pull can tighten the far side of the basket. Even if the stakes and weaver are both quite damp, a twill weave can allow tension from pulling to

travel farther than intended. Damp, close-spaced stakes in combination with plain over/under weaving and a damp weaver can cause a healthy pull to have little or no effect.

Part 5: Turning the Basket Up or In

Manipulating the stakes and using the weaver to hold them concentrates all of the changes in shape immediately under the fingertips and right in front of eyes. The actual technique for turning a basket inward is far simpler than the conceptual considerations that precede its use would indicate. The over stroke of weaving controls inward or upward changes of direction. Push inward on each stake in turn as the weaver passes over it. This is accomplished more easily with finesse than force. Choose a moderately stiff weaver if the spaces between stakes will permit it. Spritz the unwoven part of the stakes if they feel stiff. Pushing inward on the outside stakes lessens the distance the weaver needs to travel between the backs of the two stakes on either side of the pushed in stake. The effect is the same as pulling: less weaver is placed in the basket. The effect, however, involves only the pushed stake. The force of the push is determined by the intended shape of the basket. If the turn inward is to be abrupt, push almost to horizontal; if the turn is to be more gradual, push correspondingly less. As the shaping continues, the push will ever more vigorously approach horizontal. After a round of pushing in on the outside stakes and placing just enough weaver over them to hold them, there should be a distinct difference of angle between the stakes that have been pushed and those that have not. Ideally the pushed stakes will maintain their angle while the pushed stakes from the next round lean even farther into the basket. As the stakes turn ever more inward and the spaces between them become smaller, the weaver must be increasingly thinner and more flexible.

To avoid pitfalls, make certain that the pushed stake bends inward right at the top of the previous row of weaving. Under no circumstances should pushing in on the stake involve the existing weaving. If the stake merely leans inward pulling weaving with it when pushed, the basket will merely lean inward. If the top part of the weaving also bends inward when the stake is pushed on or below the top row of weaving, the area to be woven is actually stretched so that the diameter of the basket will continue to expand. The area to be woven also stretches if the stake is pushed past horizontal.

Over/under baskets with stakes that are far apart and twill baskets are more difficult to turn up or in than over/under baskets with normally placed stakes. In both cases the existing weaving almost always bends with the pushed stake. Supporting the stake that is being pushed by holding it against the last row of existing weaving will force a bend at the top of that row and facilitate the change of direction. Using the stiffest weaver allowed by the stake spaces on the rows just before the change of direction will also aid in shaping these baskets.

Part 6: Flaring the Basket Out

The under stroke controls the weaving of outward flaring baskets and outward changes of direction. Generally this type of shaping is much more difficult than turning a basket inward because of most basketmakers' innate tendency to pull on the weaver. Flaring a basket outward requires absolutely no tension on the weaver. The stakes are merely held at the desired angle while the weaver is made to curve around over and under them. To turn a basket outward, reverse the process described above for turning it inward: pull each inside stake outward at the desired angle and place the weaver under it to hold it in place.

Part 7: Straight Sided Baskets

Straight sided baskets are shaped more like baskets that flare outward, especially since it is usually necessary to hold the stakes of a straight sided basket slightly outward as they are woven. The spaces between the stakes still determine the shape. A space the same size as the other spaces in the basket must be developed at each corner. The weaver should move in and out, over and under the stakes holding them in place, but never binding or bending them. The wider the

weaver is, the more it becomes imperative that the weaver touch the previous weaving and bend as it moves in and out between the stakes.

Ed. Note – original note from the Northeast Basketmakers Newsletter: This concludes our series on Shaping written by Judy Olney. We thank her for her generosity. She writes: "This article is not under copyright, so anyone may use it, but I would, out of curiosity, like to know when and how it is used." If you reprint this in any way, please contact Judy and tell her how you used it.

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