

A Native Basketry Garden in Ross

by Charles Kennard (2020)

In an out-of-the-way corner of Ross, the Basketry Garden lies on an eastern slope of the Marin Art and Garden Center, with a view to lofty Bald Hill. It covers about half an acre adjacent to the Barn Theater, and features over seventy species of plants—most of them Californian natives—traditionally used in basketry or cordage-making. Woven fences, big baskets, and basket beehives (skeps) punctuate this semi-wild area.

The garden is intended to display a variety of plants used by Native basket weavers, demonstrate traditional cultivation and harvesting practices, and to be a minor source of basketry materials. It also attracts hummingbirds, juncos, phoebes, and many other birds and insects. Red-shouldered and red-tailed hawks are often wheeling overhead.

I was inspired to create this garden by the discovery of a patch of whiteroot sedge (*Carex barbara*), a grass-like plant used by the Pomo and other central Californian tribes in making extremely fine basketry. This small patch was hemmed in by thistles, dense broom and, on the downhill side, Bermuda grass stretched down to the gravel parking lot. A MAGC gardener at the time used the area as an orphanage for unwanted specimen plants. Beginning in 2004, as a volunteer, I pulled, dug, or smothered undesirable plants and replaced them with fiber plants that I propagated, begged for, or bought.

From the small patch of sedge, plants were propagated to fill a large area of the garden. In designated beds, the heavy soil has been amended with large quantities of sand and of chippings from tree services, and every two years each bed is cleared of plants and the underground rhizomes. The hundreds of removed plants are donated to STRAW for creek restoration on Lagunitas Creek, while many of the rhizomes—a prized weaving material up to six feet long—are given to Native and non-Native weavers.

Other prominent basketry plants are seven species of willow, coppiced or pollarded (i.e., cut above deer grazing height) annually to produce long shoots. The native grey willows (*Salix exigua*) growing here are clones from the last tree

of the species growing in the Ross Valley, on Lagunitas Road. The mother tree died in about 2005, and I have planted cuttings at several locations in the valley. Marsh plants grow in and around a group of water tubs: two species of tule, narrowleaf cattail, common reed, threesquare (*Schoenoplectus americanus*), river bulrush (*Bolboschoenus fluviatilis*), and several species of *Juncus*. Deer grass, looking like 3feethigh fountains, has flowering stems that are used for the foundation of coiled baskets. Redbud and creek dogwood have reddish stems and attractive flowers. Dogbane, milkweeds and leatherroot (*Hoita macrostachya*) are used for string-making. There is also a section reserved for conifers, and one for desert plants used in basketry.

Each plant used for basketry or string-making has an optimum time for gathering, relating to its growth stage or benefit to the plant's growth or for pest control. So, redbud—valued for its reddish bark—is cut in winter when the bark adheres to the wood, whereas grey willow is typically cut in late February when the bark can be slipped off and discarded. After gathering, plants are processed to a stage convenient for storing and seasoning, and only later, trimmed for use.

As a basket-weaver interested in many different kinds of traditional techniques from around the world, I use many of the fiber plants in the garden, and also provide them to my students.



Craft and nature are blended in the Basketry Garden. In the foreground is a Romanian-style fence woven with sycamore shoots, capped with a mat of Harding grass straw. Photo by Charles Kennard.

The Basketry Garden, as a part of MAGC, is open and free to visitors at all times, although, as of this writing, the parking lots are closed to cars. A plant list and map are available by request to charleskennard@comcast.net

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