Weaving a Field Basket  ●  Growing Native Ferns  ●  Natives Common to Florida and Nova Scotia
Weaving a Serenoa Field Basket

Saw palmetto (Serenoa repens) is a sturdy native palm that occurs as an understory plant in wet to dry flatwoods and hammocks throughout Florida and the southeastern United States. A variety of wildlife finds the saw palmetto useful. Florida panthers prefer saw palmetto for daytime resting and natal den sites, and black bears use the plant for cover and forage, eating both the apical meristem and the abundant fruits. For human animals, a single, waxy palmetto leaf can be used to make a convenient fan to cool off or swat mosquitoes with, or to weave a dandy basket, right in the field.

Selecting a palmetto leaf
The first step is to choose a leaf. The size of the leaf will determine the size of the finished basket. Look for a fresh, young, symmetrical leaf, and cut it near the base of the plant, leaving the long stem intact (1). Use the blade of your cutting shears or knife held at an angle to scrape off the small spines along the stem, but be careful – the spines are where the “saw” in the name saw palmetto comes from (2–3).

Preparing to weave the basket
Weaving can begin immediately after cutting if you plan to use the basket in the field, however working with a green leaf is more difficult, and the plant fiber will shrink and loosen when it dries. If you plan on keeping the basket for more than one use, a little preparation is in order. Avoid exposing the leaf to heat or direct sun. Clean the leaf with soap and water, and rinse it to remove any potential disease vectors. Pat the leaf dry, and press it between sheets of newspaper for a day or two. Placing something heavy on top will help flatten the leaf, making it easier to work with.

The weaving process
Start the weaving process by laying the leaf face up on a flat surface (4). Follow the stem visually to find the center of the leaf, and fold the first, centermost leaflet over at a right angle (5). Fold the second leaflet across the first (6). Proceed to fold the leaflets over, alternating sides and moving over and under until about 6 rows are completed (7–9).

Tucking in the ends
The body of the basket is complete (10), but the top edges must be finished off by tucking them under. Start with the leaflets on the top of the basket, folding them down and tucking them underneath the parts you’ve already woven. Use the same “over and under” weaving technique used earlier to form the body of the basket (11–16).

By Dick Workman and Marjorie Shropshire
Proceed around to the back side of the basket, tucking in the loose leaflets, folding them and weaving them into the body of the basket (17). Crease the leaflets with your fingernail as needed. Leaflets can be folded both inside and outside of the basket. Proceed until both sides are finished. Use a pocket knife or scissors to trim off the ragged ends of the leaflets so the basket looks neat (18–19).

Making the handle
The handle of the basket is formed from the stem or petiole. Use a sharp knife to carefully split the stem into two sections, stopping when the split is about 5 inches away from the leaf end of the stem (20–21). Always cut away from yourself when using a knife. Limber up the stem by carefully bending it a little at a time. Don’t try to bend it all at once, or it will break (22). Once you can bend the stem all the way over in a smooth arc, push it through the basket from the inside, about 2 leaflet widths down from the top edge. Make sure that it is in a centered position before allowing it to come out the front of the basket (24–25). It will be necessary to lock the handle inside the basket, so push the end of the handle back through to
the inside, (26) making sure that its end goes to the bottom point of the basket (27–28). To create the lock, one half of the split stem will point at the bottom of the basket, and the other will fold upward. Push the upward folding section of the stem underneath one of the woven leaflets to lock it securely (29). The finished basket is now ready for gathering any small fruits, nuts, or berries you might find as you graze your way through the Florida landscape (30–33).

REFERENCES CONSULTED

About the Author
Dick Workman attended Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, and is the author of Growing Native: Native Plants for Landscape Use in Coastal South Florida. He serves on the advisory board of the University of Florida Natural History Museum’s Randell Research Center at Pineland (Lee County) where he sometimes can be found demonstrating palm frond weaving, twining plant fibers, fire-carving gumbo limbo wood or playing the conch shell horn. He is a founding member of the Florida Native Plant Society.
The Florida Native Plant Society
PO Box 278
Melbourne FL 32902-0278

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Editor: Marjorie Shropshire, Visual Key Creative, Inc. palmetto@fnps.org ● (772) 285-4286 ● 1876 NW Fork Road, Stuart, FL 34994

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Official definition of native plant:
For most purposes, the phrase Florida native plant refers to those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to the best available scientific and historical documentation. More specifically, it includes those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.

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