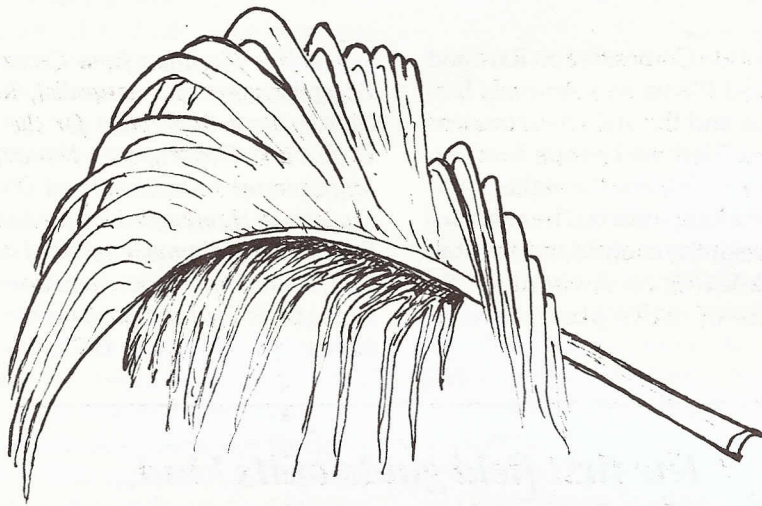


Primitive Technology or Making Do with Native Plants

Text and illustrations by Dick Workman



Imagine yourself in the place of Jonathan Dickinson, shipwrecked 300 years ago on the east coast of Florida. Living off the bounty of Florida's ecosystems took some adjustment for Mr. Dickinson. It would no doubt stretch the patience of present-day Floridians to go several months without a Publix. But Dickinson actually fared quite well, primarily by eating those nutritious palmetto berries. Once he got used to the taste, the 83% carbohydrate, 8 1/2% fat and 3% protein kept him pretty well fueled. (Today, with saw palmetto berries selling at prices up to \$3.30 per pound, he could have spent an afternoon picking palmetto fruit, cashed in his pickings, and stayed at a Best Western with room service.)

Like the European visitors before him, Dickinson found the indigenous people of Florida managing very well indeed for themselves. The state's native plant communities provided food,

medicine, clothes, houses, transportation, and materials for artistic expression — in short, the necessities for a reasonably high quality of life.

Florida native plants can still improve the quality of life. The study of how that can be done is fascinating to people who have an interest in hands-on learning and in the social science side of plant studies. The study of man's use of plants is known as *ethnobotany*. When plant remains excavated from cultural sites are studied, the science is *archeobotany*. When plant remains from cultural sites are studied to determine how they were used by man, the science is *archaeoethnobotany*. To better understand the way aboriginal people used plants, many scientists re-create — or *replicate* — artifacts of plant material.

This emerging discipline of *primitive technology* — in which artifacts are replicated using tools and techniques

appropriate to the period, based upon scientific records — helps explain how people lived day to day. In Florida, it has suggested a variety of ways that people used the plants around them before European explorers arrived.

Through primitive technology, it is possible to illustrate possible pre-contact uses of plants, including cordage, basketry, adornment, and food. First-hand experiences with uses of native plants provide useful insight for archeologists and archeobotanists studying the excavated remains of civilizations, and can assist in putting pieces of the puzzle together.

Much of the primitive technology information presented in this article was inspired by Robin Brown and his book, *Florida's First People*, available through the FNPS Subtropical Trader. This book has information on paint manufacture from strangler fig sap, shark tooth carving tools, and many more items that cultivate interest in native plants.

Primitive technology is especially valuable for new Florida residents who aren't familiar with our plant communities. It reinforces the importance of maintaining a quality natural flora, and helps people appreciate the human connection with Florida native plants.

If a poll had been taken of Florida's aboriginal people prior to their discovery of exotic people from Europe, asking which plants were most important,

the list would be topped by the sabal palm. Used for food, clothing, and shelter, few plants are as widely distributed and could have been so useful in the lives of early Floridians.

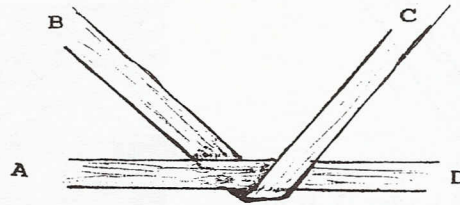
An interest in native plants may have led many of you to sample sabal palm berries for their datelike flavor that leaves you wishing there were more flesh on these seeds. Or you may have eaten the heart of a "cabbage" palm in a salad. But the following exercise introduces you to yet another use of the sabal palm: weaving its fronds to make a genuine (and politically correct) Florida hatband.

Begin by gathering a fresh sabal palm frond that is at its productive peak with no yellowing of the leaf. Wash it off with water and store it in the shade for two or three days until the stiffness has gone out of the leaf and it has a leathery, flexible feel when wrapped around a finger. If it cracks when you flex it, it's either too fresh or too dry. Start over if your palm leaf isn't in the right condition.

With a knife — or letter opener if you're accident prone — strip the mid-ribs from two or three of the long straight leaf segments, being careful not to take too much of the leaf, which you'll need for weaving. Make two long strips of leaf between $\frac{1}{4}$ - to $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch wide, depending on how wide you want your bracelet or headband to be. Then, follow the illustrated steps for weaving them together.

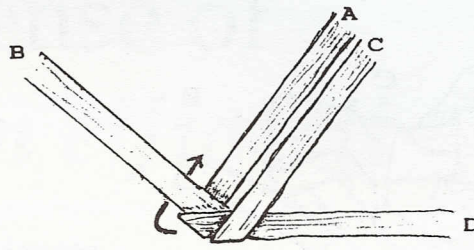
This exercise can yield more than a woven palm-leaf hatband; it should leave you with an enhanced understanding of the relationship indigenous people had with the native plants that all Floridians — past and present — have in common.

Making a Palm Frond Strap



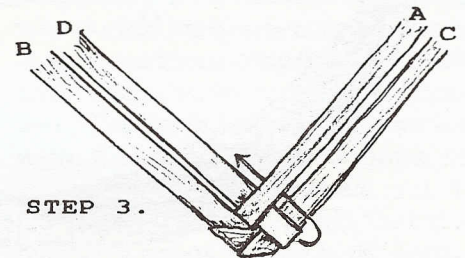
STEP 1.

STEP 1. Fold one strip at a 45 degree angle and crease it to make a "V," leaving one side about 3 or 4 inches shorter than the other. Fold the second strip in the middle and crease it so you know where the middle is and place it through the V fold. Place the middle 3 or 4 inches off to one side. This makes splicing easier.



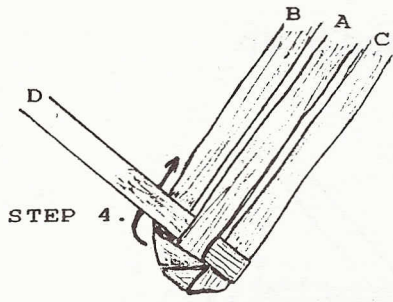
STEP 2.

STEP 2. Take strip end A and fold it under strip B and up to parallel strip C. Keep the strips close together to end up with a nice tight weave to your hatband.



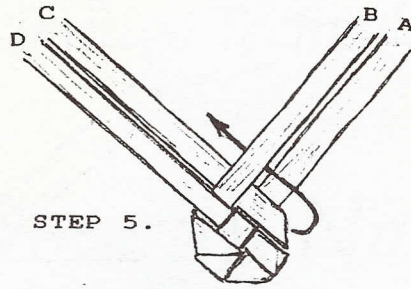
STEP 3.

STEP 3. Take the end of strip D and fold it over C and under A. You should have a double V now. Remember to keep the weave tight.



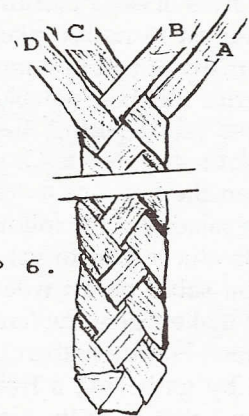
STEP 4.

STEP 4. Fold strip B under D. If the weave isn't staying as tight as you'd like, you can crease the strips at each fold with your fingers.



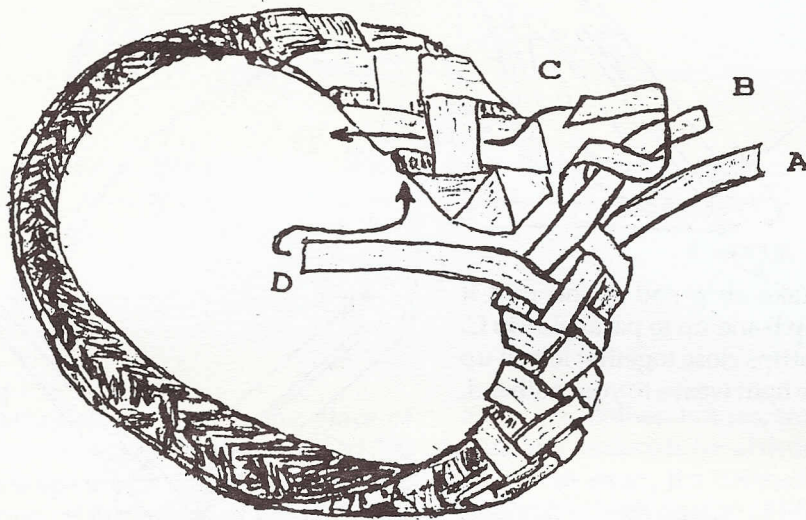
STEP 5.

STEP 5. Fold strip C over A and under B. You will notice we have a double V again. Repeat steps 4 and 5 until you get to the desired length. Before strips get too short to weave, take a new strip of the same width and overlap two or three inches of the short strip and continue. To be neat, hide the end of the new strip under a cross strip.



STEP 6.

STEP 6. When the hatband has reached the desired length, end the weave with a double V as in step 5. You will need strips 3 or 4 inches long to connect the ends. At this point, if you can stand to wait, you should allow the leaf strips to finish the drying and shrinking process. After another day inside you can go back over the weave and tighten it up.



STEPS 7 AND 8.

STEP 7. To join the ends, take strip C and slide it under the first cross strip.

STEP 8. Fold strip D under the band and crease the fold. Slide the end under the cross strip on the inside of the band. Bring it around front and place it under another crossing strip. You can continue or cut off the strip at a length that hides the end under a cross strip.

STEP 9. Fold the strips B and A under the band and finish as in step 8.

To make a belt, double or triple the thickness of the weavers and use the same procedure used for the hatband. Instead of connecting the ends you can twine the weavers together at the end to make a cord that can be tied to the other end of the belt to hold up your pants or tie to your Toyota bumper to tow your Bronco or whatever. Instructions for twining are found in Robin Brown's book, *Florida's First People*.

• *Dick Workman is a founder of FNPS and author of Growing Native: Native plants for Landscape Use in Coastal South Florida. He has worked in Florida since 1973, always with native plants. His interest in primitive technology began in 1968 while studying anthropology in the Mojave desert. He is currently president of CoastPlan, Inc., an environmental consulting firm in Fort Myers, Florida.*