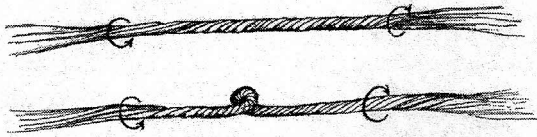


# making cordage



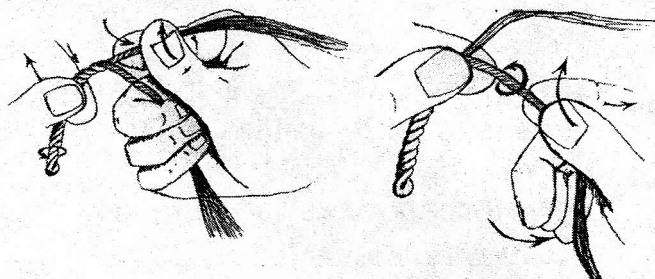
by Nancy Guildersleeve

Cordage (rope) has been made since earliest times when it was needed to lash all sorts of things together, from shelter supports to burden bundles. Examples of Calusa fishing nets dating from 700 - 1500 AD made of palm fiber cordage are on display at the Florida Museum of Natural History (Gainesville, FL), along with an excellent video of cordage making. In the south, the husks from field corn have been twisted into rope and used for chair seats for years. Cattails are another traditional rope seating material, used for cordage in other areas. Hong Cong grass, sold for seating and used as rim fillers today by basket makers, is a Far East cordage.

A variety of plant materials can be used for cordage. Long, leafy plants work well: daylily, iris and cattail leaves are good. Usually the leaves are cut or pulled at the end of the growing season but before they start to crumble, bundled in small clumps and hung up to dry. I like to pull daylily leaves when they just start to yellow at the tip. Experiment with plants available to you, some will be too soft to make a strong cord but might work when mixed with another plant.

One of the best cordage fibers comes from *Yucca filamentosa* (beargrass) a Florida native which grows in rosettes of long (2 -3') strong leaves. These can be split into fibers and then twisted. Another yucca, Spanish Bayonet (*Yucca aloifolia*) is a common landscape plant. Its leaves are thick and need to be pounded to release the fibers. (Both yuccas have lethal thorns on the ends of the leaves which should be clipped off before using the plant material). The Calusa fishing nets were made from the thin strings found on the edges of *Sabal palmetto* fronds. Cordage has been made from Spanish moss and from various roots and barks, especially mulberry, cedar and cypress.

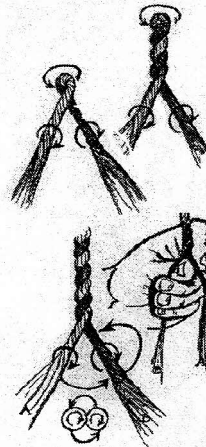
Cordage making is similar to spinning except that the fibers are twisted and plied together at the same time. One method involves rolling the fibers down the thigh, another uses both hands with the fibers hooked over a peg, nail or tree branch, twisted and then folded over each other.



1- I use one hand to do the twisting and plying, the other to hold the completed cordage and keep the twist from unraveling.

2-To prepare the dried plant material for cordage, first soak it in hot water for a few minutes (not more than 10). Dip a terry cloth towel in hot water and wring it out. Lay the soaked plant material on the towel and wrap it up, let it sit a few minutes to "mellow". Find a shallow bowl or cup for water to keep your fingers moist.

When ready to begin, unwrap the towel and take out two pieces of plant. You may want to split the leaves to make a thinner start for the cord. I usually split daylily leaves along the center rib and twist from the butt end toward the tip.



3-Tie two leaves (or a clump of fibers) together at the butt end or work with one leaf split almost to the end. Hold this between the thumb and first finger of one hand with one leaf (or group of fibers) above the other. With the other hand, twist the top leaf away from you, then fold it over the bottom leaf. This is done by folding the first finger down and using the second finger to pull the bottom leaf up to the top.

4-Repeat the process: twist away, fold over; twist away, fold over. As you work the "holding" hand moves along to grab the twists as they are formed.

5-Keep your working fingers moist by dipping them in the water container while you twist and fold. Like any other craft, cordage making becomes easy with practice. Some people practice with damp soda straw wrappers.

It can be done with any scrap yarn or long grass, old "bad" raffia makes good cordage. If you must stop, let the plant material dry and re-mellow when you return to the process.

