

## **A Valuable Investment**

Sweetgrass basketry is an African Art form that has been practiced continuously in South Carolina for over three hundred years. Brought to the area by slaves who came from West Africa, basket making is a traditional art form which has been passed on from generation to generation. Wherever rice was grown on the South Atlantic Coast, coiled baskets were made to use in the harvest. During the long decline of rice production - from The Civil War to World War I - African American basketmakers continued to "sew" baskets on Plantations on the small family farms they had acquired.

Men made large workbaskets from marsh grasses called bulrush (*Juncus roemerianus*). Women made functional baskets for everyday living in the home. They were made from the softer, pliable grass commonly called sweet grass (*Muhlenbergia filipes*) because of its pleasant fragrance, similar to the smell of fresh hay.

Materials, functions, and techniques of construction have changed. Sweetgrass sewn with palmetto leaves have replaced those bound with oak splints of palmetto butts as the preferred materials in the baskets. The wide winding trays called "fanners", which once served to separate the chaff from the rice, now might hold magazines. A century ago, vegetable baskets carried mountains of produce to market.

Big open baskets are still used for indoor uses. Covered storage baskets in the plantation era, might have contained grain, yarn or sewing supplies. The grain they once held is long gone, but sewing and yard baskets remain staples of the trade.

All the basket shapes from this era may be seen today on basket stands along Highway 17 South, on street corners in Charleston, South Carolina and yes, even in Georgetown, South Carolina.

Today museums and art collectors throughout the world purchase baskets. Each basket reflects the artist's skill as both designer and technician. Basket's value increases with age and with proper care it will last indefinitely.

The fundamental rewards of the craft have been enhanced since the 1970's by an expanding public interest in African-American folk art. In the search for the roots of black Americans, sweet grass basketry provides tangible evidence of the African heritage.



# **Sweetgrass**

## **The African Art of Coil Basketry**



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## A Gullah Greeting

*" I Gladdee Fa Meet Ya.  
How Oonnah Fa Do Daday"*

*I am so glade to meet you.  
How are you doing today?*

In the "Gullah" or Geechee" dialect of the South Carolina Islands and Low Country, most conversations are delivered in a lilting musical staccato.

Gullah defines a culture and a people as well as a language. Gullah, which is a combination of African and English words, was developed by the slaves in order to communicate with each other when they were brought to the coast of South Carolina. Some descendants of these slaves have maintained this cultural language which can be heard in various stages in the South.

Most of Gullah vocabulary is of English origin, but the grammar and major elements of pronunciation come from a number of West African languages, such as Ewe, Mandinka, Igbo, Twi and Yoruba. The name, "Gullah", itself probably derives from "Angola" (and possibly from the large number of slaves who arrived from that part of Africa in the early 1800s). "Geechee" -- another name for the language and culture of black Sea Islanders -- comes from a tribal name in Liberia. Traditions, language and myth stayed longer with the coastal Carolina

Gullahs, who were allowed greater latitude of self-sufficiency and were relatively isolated on the Sea Islands.

## Mary Graham-Grant on Sweetgrass Basketry

Born and reared along the coast in Georgetown, South Carolina, I began sewing baskets as a hobby and as people began to ask for baskets as gifts for other people, I decided to expand and show at arts and crafts festivals in other areas so that a greater percentage of people could take advantage of having a handmade basket. It gives me great pleasure to know that my baskets will travel all over the United States and abroad.

Sewing baskets is a part of history, and I do not want to see it die out. It is fast becoming a dying art because the older people are getting too old to make the baskets and the younger people don't have the patience nor do they want to take the time to make them. Our materials are also disappearing because of coastal development.

I am dedicated to preserving the tradition of sweet grass basketry since sewing my first basket in 1990. My intent is not only to practice the art form that has survived in South Carolina for over 300 years, but to teach a new generation of basketmakers about their heritage, and about the beauty of form and function created with sweet grass,

pine needles and bulrush. The sweet grass baskets that I make are similar to the baskets that are made in Sierra Leone, Africa.

## Caring For Your Sweetgrass Basket

Because the grasses used in these baskets are from swamps and marsh areas, water will not hurt them. With a soft brush or cloth, they can be carefully washed in soapy water and rinsed in cold water. They should then be air dried. This is the only care they require.

## Materials Used

Sweetgrass  
Bulrush  
Longleaf Pine Needles  
Palmetto Leaves  
Canning

