

Giant Cane and Southeastern Indian Baskets

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Among the wide variety of natural materials suitable for basket making, one of the most attractive is giant cane (Figure 1), an Oklahoma native plant. Taxonomically, giant cane is in the genus *Arundinaria*, and the family Poaceae (grasses). This genus comprises the only native species of bamboo in the continental United States. Hitchcock (1971) recognized one genus: *Arundinaria* Michx. (cane) and two species: *Arundinaria macrosperma* Michx., giant cane, and *Arundinaria tecta* Walt. Muhl., switch cane. However Estes and Thompson (1984), following F. A. McClure, recognized one species, *A. gigantea* (Walter) Muhlenberg (cane) with three inclusive subspecies: *A. gigantea* ssp. *gigantea*, ssp. *tecta* (Walter) McClure, and ssp. *macrosperma* (Michaux.) McClure. Taylor and Taylor (1991) recognized one species, *A. gigantea* (Walt.) Muhl., giant cane. The taxon relevant to Oklahoma, and to southeastern Indian basketry generally, is *A. gigantea* ssp. *gigantea*, which will be referred to herein as giant cane.

Giant cane is a robust grass with culms (stems) reaching five meters or more in height and 5 to 8 cm (2 - 3 in) in diameter. It is the most widespread of the three subspecies, forming extensive colonies or canebrakes on the first and second terraces of major streams and wet lowlands. It is found in the Mississippi River Valley, the Appalachian-Ozarkian Uplands (including the Ouachita Highlands (USGS 2004), and the Gulf Coastal Plain (Estes and Thompson 1984), including much of eastern Oklahoma. It spreads rapidly by creeping horizontal rhizomes. The erect, woody culms are perennial--sometimes branching with flowering branchlets borne in fascicles on the main stem or on primary

branches. Giant cane flowers infrequently and the flowering stems die after setting seed. Sterile branches, which are numerous, are branched repeatedly. The caryopses (seed grains) are large, up to 1.5 cm (0.5 in) long, floury, and are edible. They are produced in great abundance on each flowering stem. Swanton (1946) notes that they were used as food by southeastern Indians. Cane stalks grow rapidly, forming dense, tall stands that were formerly widespread and numerous in suitable habitats across the southeast. However, populations are now limited, probably due to the introduction of domestic animals and to the draining and clearing of fertile, lowland sites for agriculture. Both cattle and swine relish the young shoots, while pigs also root in the soil to consume the rhizomes.

Cane culms are jointed with hollow internodes. In contrast to most grasses, the stems are woody and there is extensive deposition of lignin and silica in the outer layer (Estes and Thompson 1984). This and the length of the fibers contribute to the strength of the stem. The culms are round in cross-section; thus they are lightweight and flexible, as well as strong. The hard, shiny surface of the culm results partly from a silica-wax cuticle which forms a thin layer over the silica-impregnated epidermis. The culm is therefore nearly impervious to water. These characteristics make giant cane an excellent material for the manufacture of many items of material culture, and it was utilized for many purposes by both aboriginal and historic Indian peoples of the southeastern United States. Swanton (1946) refers to cane as "one of the most important of all raw materials," for southeastern Indians. It was

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used for spears, arrows, blowguns, fishing crails and traps, beds, corncribs, flageolets, baskets, mats, and many other items. Blake and Cutler (2001) have recorded cane from prehistoric sites in Illinois, Indiana, and Arkansas, indicating some antiquity to the use of this material.

Giant cane was the favorite basketry material of such tribes as the Choctaw, Cherokee, Creek, Chitimacha, Natchez, and Caddo. Most southeastern basketry was made by the technique of weaving, as opposed to coiling (Hudson 1976). That is, weft (horizontal) elements were built up onto a warp (vertical) foundation. Twilling, in which two or more weft splints were passed over two or more warp splints, was the prevailing weave. The twilling technique produced a wide variety of diagonal and herringbone patterns, and when colored splints were combined with natural splints, the resulting baskets and mats were quite decorative, as well as useful.

Cane was usually converted into basketry splints immediately after gathering, though it could be processed later (Gettys 1984). The long lengths of cane were split lengthwise into quarters with a stout sharp knife. The object was to obtain a long and strong, flexible strip of even thickness. The splints were then trimmed along each edge to make them of uniform width, and scraped to a smooth texture on the inner surface. The glossy, natural, outer surface of the cane contributed to the beauty of cane baskets.

Some of the splints were dyed black, red, yellow, purple, or brown using dyes obtained from plants (Sinton 1946, Gettys 1984). A variety of mats and baskets were made. Large twilled cane mats, measuring about 152 cm by 183 cm (5 ft by 6 ft), were used for bedding, for floor covering, to cover the seats in the square ground (summer council arena), to cover the walls and roofs of houses, and to wrap the bodies of the dead for burial. The finest

Southeastern baskets were double weave baskets, so called because they are woven with back-to-back inside and outside fabrics, such that the surface of the basket was glossy and smooth both inside and out (Hudson 1976).

Like other tribes, the Choctaw produced many types of cane baskets for which they had names, including carrying baskets, hampers, pack baskets, trays, and pointed baskets. Of special importance was a three-piece set of baskets used in the preparation of hominy, a dietary staple. The set consisted of a winnowing basket or "fanner," (*obfke'o'*) (Figure 2), a sieve or "sifter," (*ishsho'ha*) (Figure 3), and a shallow container or tray (*tapá*) (Figure 4), (Bushnell 1909). Collectively, this trilogy of baskets came to be called "Tom Fuller" baskets, the term deriving from the Choctaw word for hominy, *tanfula* (Edwards 1932).

Hominy was made from whole kernels of dried corn which were first soaked in cool water to which had been added some wood-ash lye (Hudson 1976). The next day the corn was drained and pounded in a mortar to loosen the hulls and crack the grains. The cracked corn was then separated from the hulls with the "fanner," a large flat basket with a shallow pocket at one end. The corn was placed in the basket which was then agitated up and down and back and forth to separate the heavier hominy from the lighter hulls. The "sifter" had a loosely woven plaited bottom through which the smaller grains could be separated from the coarser grains. The latter were returned to the mortar for further cracking. The tightly-woven cane tray had many uses, such as holding cracked and uncracked hominy, corn meal, and bread.

The accompanying photographs are of "Tom Fuller" baskets made of giant cane and purchased by the author in 1977 from a Choctaw basket maker of Wright City, Oklahoma. Fine quality cane baskets are



Figure 1 Stand of Giant Cane in Cherokee County, Oklahoma.

Cane photo by author.
Basket photos courtesy of Patricia A. Folley



Figure 2 Fanner or winnowing basket (*objko'*).

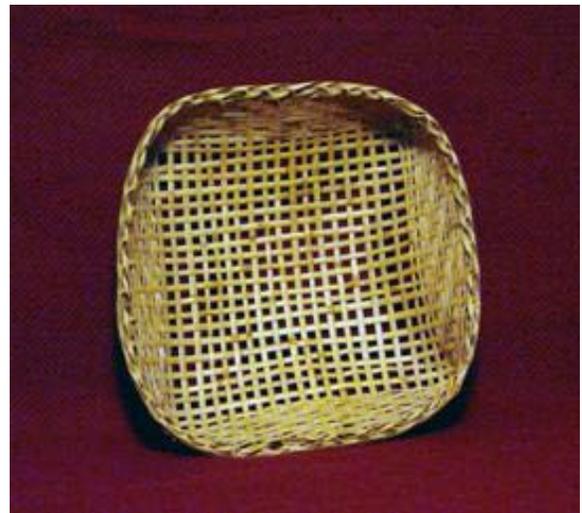


Figure 3 Sifter or sieve (*ishsho'ha*).



Figure 4 Utility basket, a shallow container, or tray (*tapa*).

produced today by the Mississippi Choctaw and the Chitimacha of Louisiana. Their sales outlets may be easily located on the internet. Gettys (1984) knew of only three cane weavers in Oklahoma (one of whom had produced this author's baskets), and believed that traditional forms not adaptable to modern uses had been dropped. Although it is highly unlikely that any "Tom Fuller" sets are now made for general sale, it is quite possible that a few Oklahoma Choctaw artisans are capable of filling a special order. Inquiry might begin with the Choctaw Nation Tribal Complex Office in Durant or at museums and specialty shops featuring authentic southeastern Indian arts and crafts.

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