

## Native American Uses of Basswood



**Basswood Outer Bark**



**Basswood Inner Bark**

The basswood trees growing along our trails and in our forest today are the direct descendents of trees that grew on this land long before European settlers arrived.

For countless centuries, materials gathered from basswood trees were an important part of the daily lives of Native Americans who lived here in the northern hardwood forests.

Sheets of basswood bark, along with cattail mats sewn with basswood twine, were used as coverings for wigwams.

Bees attracted to the fragrant blossoms produced honey that could be harvested from the hollow basswood “bee trees” where the bee colonies had stored it.

Teas and medicines were made from the flowers. The fresh, mucilaginous inner bark was sometimes used as a bandage for wounds.

While there are limited recorded references to the use of the basswood as food, one source states that the Ojibwa were known to eat parts of the tree. They boiled the sap down to a sweet syrup. We know that young leaves could be used as a salad plant and winter buds could be an emergency food or used as a vegetable. If a tree had been cut down for its bark or wood in early spring the growth layer called the cambium directly next to the inner bark provided a tasty snack. (Thayer, S. p. 272)

Because the wood was easily carved and had a soft, light grain, Iroquois tribes made ceremonial masks by first carving facial features into a tree trunk and then cutting the mask off and hollowing out the back. (Harlowe, W. p 256)

By far the most important resource Native Americans obtained from the basswood was the long fiber that came from the tough inner bark. Various sources state that it was used to make tangle free rope, twine and thread, thongs, baskets, tumplines or burden straps to carry heavy loads, belts, fishnets, webbing for snowshoes, storage bags, cooking bags, cord to sew cattail and other mats together or to tie up packets, finely woven mats to strain maple syrup, and even fine thread to suture wounds.



**Basswood Twine Made From Inner Bark**

Balls of twine made not only from basswood, but also from nettles and other plant stems, had hundreds of uses and were saved along with strips of bark ready to be processed in handy storage locations.

Just how that twine was made was recorded in 1905 by Frances Densmore in a publication called Chippewa Customs. She interviewed and observed women of that time and wrote:

“One of the most important articles in the economic life of the Chippewa was the twine made from the fiber that lies between the bark and the wood of the basswood tree.

“In removing the bark from the tree an incision was made at a point as high as a man could reach, the cut descending straight to the ground, after which the bark was turned back in a sheet. It was then cut in lengthwise strips about four inches wide and laid among the reeds at the edge of a lake or pond, being held in place by tying the reeds together above it. There it remained for about 10 days. The writer saw these strips of bark taken from the water, softened and slippery from the soaking. The rough outer bark was easily detached and the soft yellow fiber or inner bark heaped in the bottom of the boat. In this form it was ready to store with a woman’s supply of birch bark, reeds, and other materials. There were many layers of this fiber, and the entire thickness would be needed for the strips in bags for boiling gum or in making baskets. Somewhat thinner fiber was used for woven bags, and one thickness was sufficient for twine, the fiber being split when the twine was made. In separating the layers of bark an Indian woman begins in the middle of a strip perhaps six feet in length and works toward the ends.

“Basswood bark was an article in such frequent use that a woman had a quantity of it in all thicknesses at hand and prepared it in various ways as it might be needed. If she wished to tie a small packet, she usually moistened a strip of bark by drawing it between her lips.

“The bark to be used for twisted cord was prepared by moistening it, separating it into layers, and tearing strips of the desired width. If the twine is to be very strong the bark is boiled. The woody fibers are detached from one another and the bark softened by drawing the strips of bark back and forth through the pelvic bone of a bear. This work, in old times, was usually done by children. The process of making twisted twine is described as follows by Dr. Skinner. The woman ‘takes two of the fibers in one hand and holds them, spread a few inches apart, against her bare shin. She slides the palm of her other hand backward and forward over them until the fibers twist together. At the end of each yard she combs the fibers with her fingers, selects two more, and rolling half an inch of their ends with the ends of the old piece, makes a splice so perfect that it is invisible.’ The work, as seen by the writer, was done on the flesh of the right leg above the knee, this forming a cushion on which the fibers were readily twisted. The entire process is dexterous and surprisingly rapid. Twine made in this manner was an important article of economic use.”

### Things to Think About and Do

**Pretend that you are a Native American mother living more than 100 years ago who is teaching her children how to make rope or twine. What will you tell and show them?**

**Find someone who is or will be cutting basswood trees or thinning a woodlot. Get permission to get a branch from a tree or a sapling from a clump of trunks around a stump. Have a grownup cut strips of bark from the sapling. Make twine or bark strips for weaving from it.**

Complete the chart below with a list of more present-day materials.

#### Compare and Contrast Sources of Materials for Life and Living

##### During a time before European settlers Lived Here

##### Now

Tumplines or burden straps to carry heavy loads  
Tangle free rope, twine and thread from bark  
Cord to sew cattail and other mats together  
Cord to tie up packets  
Fine thread to suture wounds  
Thongs  
Fishnets  
Webbing for snowshoes  
Storage bags  
Baskets  
Belts  
Cooking bags  
Finely woven mats to strain maple syrup

Backpacks for carrying supplies  
Jute, cotton, and linen rather bark

### Bibliography

Densmore, F. (1974). How Indians use wild plants for food, medicine and crafts. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.

Harlow, W. (1957). Trees of the eastern and central United States and Canada. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.

Thayer, S. (2006). The forager's harvest. Ogema, Wisconsin: Forager's Harvest.

---

© Dr. Hildegard Kuse and Dr. Loretta Kuse