



Inartalicipet – WEAVING TRADITIONS

If you entered a typical Alutiiq/Sugpiaq household of the 17th century, fine weaving would surround you. Grass mats would line sleeping benches, cover the walls, and hang in doorways. Woven containers for collecting, storing, and cooking food would surround a central fireplace. People would wear woven socks, mitts, and caps. A mother would hold her baby in a woven carrier. And the rafters would hold woven tools, nets for fishing and birding, and braided lines for harpoons and boats.

Inartamek piliyuq. – SHE IS MAKING A BASKET.

Weaving was both a functional and an aesthetic art. Woven objects served many purposes and were made with great care. Alutiiq weavers once made basketry from a variety of natural fibers. They worked spruce root, grasses, birch bark, baleen, and animal sinew. Today, Kodiak weavers continue to work with spruce root and grass (*weg'et*). Grass basketry is particularly prized for its extraordinarily fine weave and warm natural color. The most commonly harvested wild grass is beach rye (Latin: *Elymus areharius*), which weavers cut in coastal meadows between June and September.

Once cut, beach rye must be dried to create material suitable for weaving. First, the weaver wraps the grass in a towel or burlap bag to let it change color and sweat. Over the following two weeks, she must turn and air the grass daily to prevent molding. Next, she separates the grass leaves from their stems, sorts the pieces into piles of similar length, color, and texture, and hangs them to finish drying. Sunshine or a saltwater bath helps to bleach the grass to a pale brown. With drying complete, the weaver removes the spine from each leaf and splits the remaining tissue into thin strands.

Grass baskets are traditionally woven upside-down, beginning at the base. Grass strands should be soaked in cold water and wrapped in a damp towel. Weavers wet their fingers to keep the grass soft and pliable. However, it is important not to over wet the strands, as they may rot or darken. Weaving is a time-consuming process. It takes great skill to produce the tiny, even stitches for which Alutiiq weavers are known.

LEARN MORE:

Pacific Eskimo Spruce Root Baskets, 1981, by Molly Lee.
American Indian Art Magazine 6(2):66-73.

"If it's Not a Tlingit Basket, Then what is It?": Toward the Definition of an Alutiiq Twined Spruce Root Basket Type, 2006, by Molly Lee, *Arctic Anthropology*, 43(2):164-171.



Arlene Skinner holds "Happy Basket," made of wild Kodiak grass, silk thread, and turquoise beads. Photo by Sven Haakanson Jr.