

Gathering Spruce Roots





Native women weaving baskets, Sitka, Alaska, c. 1897.
Alaska State Library - Historical Collections - William Smith
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Background Information:

Many different items are made from spruce roots, Beautiful and functional spruce root baskets have long been made by the Tlingit and Haida people of Southeast Alaska. Gathering, then beginning the preparation of the root for weaving by heating the root and stripping off the outer bark, is a spring ritual for basket weavers.

In June 2011, renowned Sitka weaver Teri Rofkar led a group of students on a spruce root gathering expedition. Wea, age 10, joined the group to learn how to gather and prepare roots. She also learned how to acknowledge and show respect toward all living things, especially, in this case, the spruce tree.



Spruce Root Basket at Alaska State Museum



We came by boat to a cove with a wide sandy beach.



Before entering the woods, we stopped to acknowledge bear or "Grandfather". We asked his forgiveness and thanked him for letting us enter his forest to gather spruce roots.



Spruce trees, growing in sandy soil, were just inside the beach grass. There weren't a lot of bushes under the trees. Instead moss and leaf litter covered the ground and so we could find the spruce roots easily.





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Teri moved moss aside from under the spruce trees and began to dig until she found a golden spruce root. She carefully followed the root, moving more moss and digging down to expose the root.



10

Teri showed how to follow the root along its path, being careful not to break the root or disturb other roots that crossed it.



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When Teri reached the spot where the small root joined a larger one, she carefully clipped the root from the larger one. As she did so, she thanked the tree with a quiet, "Gunalchéesh" and replaced the dirt and moss. She rolled the root in a loop and placed it in a plastic bag to keep it from drying out.



After watching Teri, Wea was ready to try digging spruce roots on her own.



Wea carefully removed moss, found a root and began to follow it as it ran through the ground under one or two inches of soil.



When she had followed the root and cut it off,
Wea looped the root and put it in a plastic bag.



While Wea learned how to dig spruce roots,
others made a fire on the beach.



The coiled spruce root was placed on the coals of the fire. The root made a quiet sizzling sound as the bark loosened from it.



Wea turned the root over. When the bark was black, but not burnt, it was removed from the coals with a long stick..



Wea wore leather gloves so the hot root could not burn her hands. She carried the root away from the fire to the éénaa, - a traditional wooden tool- inserted one end of the root in the éénaa and...



...holding on to the short end, pulled the root through the cleft in the éénaa. Since it was a tight fit, the outer bark was pulled right off the root.



Wea looped the now pale yellow root again and placed it a clean plastic bag. The root must be split for weaving and that could be done in the next day or two or the root might be dried to be split later.



Wea discovered that the bark stripped from the spruce roots could be rolled into a ball.



Teri showed Wea how to warm the root bark ball by the fire so that the sap on the bark softened and "glued" the ball together.



When Wea had a good sized ball, she was able to toss it and play games with it.



As the fire began to die, Teri gave each spruce root gatherer some loose tobacco, which they threw into the fire as they said words of thanks to the spruce trees for giving their roots.

This book is intended to accompany the *Grade 5*
"Math- Basket Weaving" cultural curriculum unit.

Gathering Spruce Roots
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DRA Level 40



Kashukana



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