

Making Cordage by Scott Stoddard (American Survival Guide) March 1995

In the hierarchy of tools, rope and cordage must be near the top. A good knife is probably more important, as well as flint and steel for starting fires, but cordage has got to be right up there. It can hunt for you, help shelter you, and with sufficient strength, cordage can even save your life.

I remember as a kid trying to use weeds and grasses to tie and bind things together. Either the material was too weak to really do anything with, or too stiff and brittle (knot tying caused it to self destruct). Green pine needles sometimes worked but they were only four or five inches long. Sometimes shaving off thin, long pieces of bark from certain trees worked, but most of my experiments were failures.

It wasn't until I began to deer hunt that I would find a natural material strong enough and pliable enough to really work as cordage. With the help of Larry Dean Olsen's book "Outdoor Survival Skills", I learned to make sinew string from deer tendon. The fibers in sinew are strong enough to make a bow string, and with its natural glue, sinew can be used to hold arrows on shafts, strengthen bow staves and for wrapping and hafting stone implements.

At a "Soldier of Fortune" convention a few years ago, Linda Jamison showed me how to make cordage using dogbane. Dogbane is considered by many to be the best material available for cordage. When I was done, my twin looked as professional as anything available from the store. Other vegetable materials that work are common weeds such as stinging nettle, and velvet-leaf, and hemp (widely used for illegal smoking). The fibrous, inner bark of cedar works well, as well as the non fibrous inner bark of osage orange-one of the best woods for making bow staves.

Yucca Cordage-Here in the Southwest we have an almost unlimited supply of yucca (spanish bayonet) and agave. Yucca has some of the strongest

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fibers for making cordage and is simple to prepare. You begin by cutting a few leaves from the plant, being careful not to spike yourself. It is best to cut the sharp point off for safety sake. After harvesting a few leaves, you will need to remove the outer green pulp by either scraping with a knife, rubbing over a rock, or by pounding gently with a mallet (don't break the fibers in the process). Then soak the leaves in water for a number of hours (may take up to two days) to separate the pulp from the fiber. This process is called retting.

Separate the leaves into narrow strips with about 10-20 fibers per strip. Taking two strands or "strips" of fibers in your left hand, begin twisting the top strand (the one on the right) with your thumb and fore-finger and twist in a clockwise direction. These two steps are repeated over and over to produce a length of cord. Another way to say it would be to: (1) Twist the top (right side) strand in a clockwise direction. (2) Twist both strands together in a counter clockwise direction. If equal twisting force is applied in both of these two steps, your twine will come out looking evenly spaced and uniform. When you begin to run out of fiber (2-3 inches left), get ready to splice in a new length of fiber strand. The key to splicing is to not splice both strands at the same time. Shorten one if you have to, and splice by twisting in a new strand clockwise with your top strand. Fold down and crank counter clockwise like you normally do over the bottom strand. Keep twisting and cranking, and watch your splice disappear into the completed cord.

There is something very satisfying about taking natural materials and rendering them into something useful with your own two hands. Experiment with materials in your own backyard or local woods. See what works and what doesn't. Then once you find a plant source that will produce successful results, start twisting.