

Growing Your Own Sweetgrass

When you're putting your sweetgrass into the ground:

- Choose a location that is dry, sunny, and free of other plants. Sandy soil where nothing else grows works best.
- Put your sweetgrass into the ground in early spring.
- During the first year, water your sweetgrass during dry periods.
- After the first year, your sweetgrass only needs rain.
- Never fertilize sweetgrass that will be used for basketry.
- Once your sweetgrass is mature, "pull" it regularly or trim it back to promote new growth next year.
- Mature plants can be separated into "clumps" of new plants.
- Your sweetgrass should live for around 5 years!



Preserving Sweetgrass Basketry

Sweetgrass basketry is a centuries-old art form that is practiced nowhere else in the world, but the main raw material used in this craft is rapidly disappearing from the SC Lowcountry. The preservation of sweetgrass basketry depends on Lowcountry residents helping to produce local, sustainable supplies of sweetgrass.

You can help! Sweetgrass is a relatively maintenance-free plant that can easily grow in your yard or garden. Use the instructions in this brochure to grow sweetgrass for basket makers and help preserve a valuable tradition.



Sweetgrass on public land in Charleston, SC



Sweetgrass Basketry



A Lowcountry Tradition That You Can Help to Preserve

Instructional Brochure

Instructional Brochure

For additional copies of this brochure, visit http://www.cofc.edu/sustainability/nativespecies_sweetgrass.htm

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The History of Sweetgrass Basketry

Sweetgrass basketry is a traditional art form practiced by the descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the South Carolina coast for labor on rice plantations. Originating in Western Africa and known today as the Gullah/Geechee people, this close-knit Lowcountry community is concentrated in Mount Pleasant, SC and continues to pass basket making skills from one generation to the next.

Originally used for storage, transport of agricultural goods, and other day-to-day needs, sweetgrass baskets became sought as pieces of art in the 1930s. The baskets now appear in museums and exhibits all over the world and are recognized as one of the oldest surviving African art forms in our nation today.

While a variety of basket forms have evolved since the introduction of the art to the Southeast over 300 years ago, the basic designs used then are still produced and sold by many basket makers. Sweetgrass baskets are available at roadside stands along Hwy. 17 N in Mt. Pleasant, and in downtown Charleston at the Old Charleston Market and the Four Corners of Law.



Basket stand along Hwy. 17 N in Mt. Pleasant, SC.

Challenges Facing the Art Form

Today's sweetgrass baskets are constructed from four primary plant materials:

- blades or "threads" of sweetgrass,
- strips of cabbage palm tree leaves,
- needles of the longleaf pine tree, and
- cuttings of black bulrush, a common marsh grass.

Sweetgrass is the most important ingredient, but this once-abundant natural resource has become difficult to find because of residential and commercial development of sweetgrass habitat—coastal islands and marshes. Many basket makers are now forced to travel to other states to collect the raw material. The establishment of local, sustainable supplies of sweetgrass may become necessary to preserve this valuable art form.

Basket makers also face difficulties finding places to sell their wares. Commercial development along Hwy. 17 N in Mt. Pleasant has forced many basket stands to relocate or disappear.



Sweetgrass with pink flowers in native habitat. Photo by Karl Ohlandt.

How Can I Help?

Sweetgrass is a sturdy plant that can thrive in Lowcountry yards and gardens. Use the instructions on the following pages to produce local supplies of sweetgrass that will help basket makers to preserve this Lowcountry tradition.

Growing Your Own Sweetgrass

If you're growing your own sweetgrass from seed:

- In late November, collect mature seeds that are almost ready to fall off the plant. Or, you may be able to purchase seeds.
- Plant each seed shallowly in a small pot with soilless potting media such as peat, vermiculite, or perlite.
- Place potted seeds in a warm, sunny location.
- Seeds should emerge in a week or so, and they'll be ready to transplant outdoors in about 3 months.

If you're purchasing sweetgrass plants from a nursery:

- Make sure that the grass you're buying is the correct species. Ask for *Muhlenbergia filipes* or *Muhlenbergia capillaris*.
- For a list of Charleston area nurseries that sell sweetgrass, visit http://www.cofc.edu/sustainability/nativespecies_sweetgrass.htm



Sweetgrass planted ornamentally.

Instructions continued on next panel...