

fiber forum 2015

Bimonthly e-Newsletter November 2013 Issue 10

www.sefiberforum.org/



Flax

In the vein of presenting articles on various fibers that are used by fiber artisans, Vickie Almaroad has put together a article on her passion: Flax. Vickie is a member of the Overmountain Weavers Guild in NE Tennessee.

The picture above is a portion of her flax plot. The article is later in the newsletter. In it she takes us on a quick tour with pictures from planting to fiber in hand ready to spin.

After all the effort to grow and process flax, I find linen one of the finer fabrics. Historically, the effort taken to produce the fiber and yarn amazing.

Thank you Vickie for taking the time to put this article together and for your passion for Flax.

Walt T., editor

President's Note

Greetings All!

With its crisp, cool air, incredible color, and the smell of apple butter simmering on my stove, autumn is my favorite time of the year. Add a road trip to Asheville for SAFF and it just doesn't get any better.

You know how there are some really big small towns? SAFF is like that for me. It's a pretty big fiber festival but it maintains a small town feel. It's small enough for me to catch up with old friends and big enough to make new ones.

My friend Sandy traveled with me to Asheville again this year and as usual, we vowed not to get too carried away. Then we're like squirrels, buying stash as if there will be a shortage soon and not that I have to justify it, but winter IS coming.

The board met at Judi Jetson's home one evening at SAFF as well. She was a gracious host and an excellent cook! Her pumpkin chili was just the ticket for that cool autumn night. Thank you Judi!

SAFF and most of the fall fiber festivals are over for the year and the holiday season is just around the corner. Since our next newsletter won't be until 2014 - I wish you and yours, health and happiness, and all the best for the New Year. May it be filled with enough time to enjoy the stash we've all squirreled away!

Kristen

Chairman, Fiber Forum 2015

P.S. Did I mention I ordered a spinning chair at SAFF? I've wanted one for years and finally did it. It's a 13-month wait but well worth it.

New Mailing Address!

Southeast Fiber Forum Association (or SFFA)
PO Box 241243
Memphis, TN 38124-1243

Chair Notes

Volunteering makes you happier and healthier. Really, it does. A new [University of Exeter Medical School paper](#) finds that “volunteering is associated with lower depression, increased well-being, and a 22 percent reduction in the risk of dying.” It’s even better than chocolate which, most likely, doesn’t reduce your risk of dying.

This is wonderful news, because your Fiber Forum 2015 committee wants you to be happy and healthy, and we also need volunteers: Much as we’d all like to think that events like Fiber Forum magically appear fully formed and ready to delight us, the truth is that it takes many minds, many hands, and time. We need you!

Chair the Hospitality committee, help setup online registration, help design promotional materials and/or a social media campaign, offer to staff the registration table, coordinate door prizes, make name tags. Help a lot or help a little, but help. You’ll not only be happier and healthier, you’ll get to see and enjoy the fruits of your labor at Fiber Forum 2015. **Don’t delay, email info@fiberartsalliance.org today.!**

Suzi
Southeast Fiber Arts Alliance
SFFA 2015 Host Organization

Southeast Fiber Forum Association Bi-Annual Conference

April 16 - 19, 2015

Registration begins:

October 1 2014 for members

October 15, 2014 for non-members

website: www.sefiberforum.org for information and download forms

Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts

556 Parkway, Gatlinburg, TN 37738

<http://www.arrowmont.org/>

865-436-5860

Contact Arrowmont directly later in 2014 for room reservations

Editor's Notes and Call for Articles

As we are well over a year away from the 2015 forum at Arrowmont, I would like to request articles from you members sharing some aspects concerning the 'growing', 'harvesting', processing, spinning, and using of various plant and animal fibers. Along the way, possibly others may get the 'bug' to expand their world of fiber. A page or two is all that you need to think about. I can help edit if you wish. Images can be used also.

I try to get the newsletter out every two months with a deadline of the 25th of the previous month. (i.e. June 25th for the July issue)

-Walt Turpening, editor (walt.turpening@att.net)

SFFA Scholarships 2015

Scholarships will be available! Please be sure to also complete an application for classes and send with the scholarship form.

This is an exciting and rich opportunity for any student in the Fiber Arts. Thirteen scholarships for class tuition, room and board and Fiber Forum membership will be awarded. The students will be assistants to the instructors.

Questions? contact: Michaela McIntosh at michaela9749@att.net

Southeast Fiber Forum Association 2013-2015 Board of Directors

President: Kristen Nicholas
chairman@sefiberforum.org

Treasurer: Angela Schneider
akspins@comcast.net

Secretary: Deb Bartz
bartzdeborah@yahoo.com

Member: Michaela McIntosh
(Outreach)
michaela9749@att.net

Member: Walt Turpening
(membership/communication)
walt.turpening@att.net

2015 Conference Chair: Suzi Gough
sgough@bellsouth.net

Past President: Judi Jetson
judi@judijetson.com

Webmaster: Maurice Blackburn
webster@sefiberforum.org

Upcoming Events in the Region

Arkansas

Arkansas Fiber Arts Extravaganza
Hot Springs, AR
December 6-7, 2013
arfiberartsextravaganza.com

North Carolina

Carolina Fiber Frolic Spring Retreat
(with optional classes)
Sapphire, North Carolina
March 28-30, 2014
CarolinaFiberFrolic.com

Tennessee

Smoky Mountains Fiber Arts Festival
Townsend, TN
April 11-12, 2014
smokymountainfiberartsfestival.org

Part 1 From Seed to Fiber, Information gleaned from growing flax

by Vickie Almaroad, Kingsport, TN

The cultivation of flax has been going on since around 8,000 BC. The Swiss Lake dwellers gathered, spun, and wove the fibers. The basic steps they used to process the flax changed little until the spinning wheel was invented around the year 1550. Flax, *Linum Usitatissimum*, is an annual plant that can grow 30-40 inches tall. Between the woody center and the thin outer bark of the flax straw are symmetrical layers of tough flax fiber running from root to blossom end. There is a natural gum or pectin that firmly holds all parts of the plant together. Flax adapts to varying conditions of soil and temperature. It has been successfully cultivated in many parts of the world.

Step one: Yes, you must rake your entire flax plot and weed it too!

The growing of flax starts with a well-worked plot of soil. It must be loose and fine in your hand, and then the soil needs to be raked to clear any rocks, clumps of dirt, and generally anything that looks too big to your eye when you look at the whole area where you are going to plant flax. I measure my flax plots out in 15-foot squares. I have seen 20 foot squares as the normal in books, but the plow and cultivator that is used for my flax plots make a wonderful strip of worked soil in two passes which measure around 16 feet, so that is what I use.

One pound of flax seed per each foot square is the rule, but I use more. The closer the plants, the taller and thinner the plants, the finer the fiber will be.

When the flax seedlings are four to six inches tall, the plot will have to be weeded by hand. Children were once used for this chore, they were lighter in weight than adults and did not damage the young plants as much. Weeding is not pleasant, but if the flax seedlings are not overgrown with weeds when they are young, the flax plants will crowd out any weeds, as they grow taller. If you have one 20-foot square plot, weeding will be an adventure, if you have several as I do, you might consider chemical intervention. Either way, if weeds are left unchecked in a flax plot your harvest can be reduced by half or more.



Step two: The little blue flowers are pretty, but do buy a good pair of gloves.

The flax will bloom around 50-60 days after planting. The blue flowers will open when the sun strikes them and close by mid-day. Harvesting takes place about 30 days after full blooming. Leaving the flax in the plot longer produces coarse, inferior fiber. The lower third of the stalks should be yellowing.

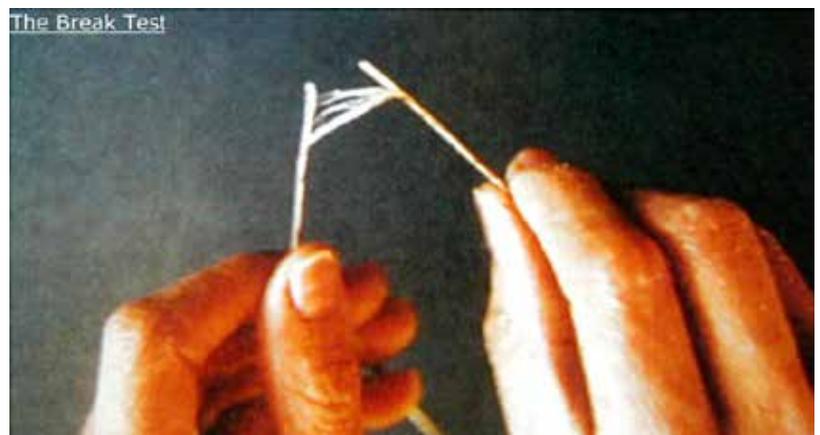
Harvesting is done by pulling the plants by hand. This keeps the full length of the fiber from root to tip, and the natural taper of the fiber for spinning. Stalks need to be pulled from the ground in neat handfuls, keeping the root ends even and then tied into bundles. These are then dried using one of the following methods; the bundles can be stacked root end on the ground in a tee-pee shape, or they can be hung on a rack or a fence to dry. I hang my crop in an old tobacco barn.



Step three: Are you kidding me? This stuff stinks and looks like weeds!

Remember the pectin holding the flax plant firmly together that was mentioned earlier in this article? Well, retting breaks down that glue. It must be done carefully. Retting will improve or ruin all the work you have done so far. Retting is a controlled rot of the flax straw. This step is the most important part of producing flax fiber, you can destroy a whole crop of flax by being careless with this. There are different ways to ret flax, the most common is dew retting. Yes, the common dew on the grass in the morning. This method takes the longest and is the most forgiving. Choose some place in the yard that is not used a lot for foot traffic and spread the bundles of dried flax straw in a single layer row. If you have more rows, leave some space between them. The retting process can take days to weeks, depending on the amount of moisture in the ground and the temperature. The color of the stalk will begin to spot and darken. The flax in each row must be turned to allow the retting to take place on the whole stalk. How many times depends on the length of time to finish retting. When my flax straw starts to ret, I turn my straw every two days. When the flax straw begins to darken and spot, the “break test” should be done every day. This is a simple way to check to see if retting needs to be stopped. Go out to your flax and pull a few single stalks from different places in the row and take them inside. Put them some place warm and let them dry. Next, “break” the stalk into two pieces, if the fibers in the middle of the break separate and you see individual fibers, you’re done. Go pick up you flax straw and dry it again. When it’s dry for the second time, you can finish processing the straw into fiber when you have time.

Flax can be retted using water in a container, or snow. Each of these methods have good and bad things to consider. Water retting can smell, and there may not be enough snow to complete retting. Each of the retting processes will give the flax fiber I different color. Dew retted flax fiber will be a silver gray color. Water retted fiber will have a honey color, and snow retted fiber will be light buff in color. One final thought, for some reason rows of retting flax seem to attract animals, especially dogs. They love to roll in it.



Step four: There's more? What do you mean, we're not done yet!

The flax straw looks like a mildewed weed right now and some where in that plant there is fiber to be had. All you have to do is break the flax straw. To do this part of the process a flax break should be used, although many people have used wooden mallets to break the outer layer of the straw. I use a break, so I will explain it's use. This tool has a hinged handle attached to a footed support with wooden blades fitted in the handle and bottom that break the outer layer of the flax. A hand of flax straw is pulled toward the person operating the break while the handle is moved up and down. The action of the wooden blades cause the outer stem of the flax to be broken into sections as the flax is pulled through the blades.



Flax Break

Step five: What good does this do, can't I skip this?

The broken hand of flax is beginning to show the fiber, now it needs to be cleaned up. The tools used for this step are a scutching board and a wooden knife, both of which are very simple. A scutching board is just that, a wide wooden board which is held upright while the hand of broken flax is allowed to hang over the top and onto the face of the board. The wooden knife, which usually looks like a thick knife or a paddle is pushed down from the top of the flax to the tip in a glancing stroke to shake as much of the broken outer layer as possible from the fiber. Many people working with flax for the first time skip this step and regret doing so. The cleaner the fiber is for the next step the easier it will be.

Step six: I'm not touching that instrument of torture!

The scutched flax fiber is now ready to be hackled. The tool for this process looks like a small bed of nails. If you look closely at a set of hackles you will see that there are different sizes of pins used. Hackles go from coarse to fine. There are generally three to five grades in a set. All hackles must be clamped down to a work area. If not, the hackle can be jerked off the work surface and hit the user's leg or foot. This can cause serious wounds. Since most hackles are old, and can be rusty, be very careful when using them. Watch where your hands are, it's very easy to rake your hand across the top of the spikes and bleed. Consider using gloves, or if you decide to do this a lot, get a tetanus shot.

Now that I've scared you into being careful, starting with the hackle that is the most coarse, lightly draw the hand of flax through the teeth of the comb. Don't let the flax go too deep into the teeth. All this does is to grab too much fiber too fast. Go gently, take your time. When the fiber goes through the comb easily, go to the next finer grade. Continue on through the set of hackles until you are finished.

Congratulations!!! You have line flax in your hand. It is the very best flax fiber to spin. Line flax is long and is usually spun from a distaff, but there are other ways of spinning line flax as well. The fiber left in the hackles should not be thrown away, please! It should be collected and hackled again and spun. This fiber is called tow. It is not as fine, or as soft, and is a shorter fiber. But it is good fiber, and after all the work to produce flax fiber, it is a shame to waste one piece. I'm never sure when the magic happens, but it does every time I work with flax. It is in the growing, or the careful steps of processing that give this fiber its allure? Once flax fiber is spun, it's earned the name of linen; soft, lustrous, strong, and ancient.