

Fleurieu Peninsula Swamps Aboriginal Values Materials



Tanya Karpany is learning and sharing information about swamp plants used in Aboriginal crafts. © Nicole Motteux, 2021

In gaining a living, Aboriginal people made tools from a wide variety of materials, many of them incorporating parts of plants that were either gathered by the makers or obtained through trade. Some historical evidence of the range of material culture is gained from early drawings, watercolour paintings and descriptions. Netting and string were made with the fibre of reeds, sedges and rushes twisted into string. There are records from Rapid Bay in the late 1800s of Aboriginal fishing nets between 6 and 9 metres long that were made from 'chewed fibres of reeds [bulrush] rolled on the thigh and twisted into cord. Strips of Acacia bark may also have been used to make twine in the Fleurieu region, including Swamp Wattle and Golden wattle, which have long bark fibres. Many Fleurieu Swamps have adjacent woodlands of Stringy Bark gum trees (*Eucalyptus obliqua* and *E. baxteri*), which has a fibrous bark used for twine and matting. Examples of southern South Australian mats in the South Australian Museum include those which have stringybark coils stitched together with sedge stems. Early records claimed that bags or baskets in South Australia were made of the leaves of the common reed [sedge?] and the bark of stringybark trees.



In gaining a living, Aboriginal people made tools from a wide variety of materials. Fleurieu Swamps were a rich source of fibre for nets, twine and fishing lines. © Nicole Motteux, 2021

Early European settlers described the making of string from the rushes that grew in the Fleurieu Peninsula (species of *Carex*, *Cyperus*, *Eleocharis*, *Gahnia*, *Juncus*, *Lepidosperma*, *Lomandra* and *Schoenus*). They said Aborigines first split the rushes and extracted the pithy centre. They would plait this material into string and ropes for “fishing lines and other things”. They also separated the pith into smaller sections and plaited these together to make long ropes, which were used to tie up their belongings when moving from place to place. String was also made from sharp-leaved rush (likely *Gahnia trifida* and *G. siberiana*). The dry, straight stems of the Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) were used as a light spear shaft while the thin, straight hardwood of tea trees (*Leptospermum* species) found in and around Fleurieu Swamps were used for spears and spear tips.



Quartzite cobbles from the glacial valleys where Fleurieu Swamps are found were used by Aboriginal people

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Glacial and fluvio-glacial, quartzite, cobble stones are recorded as having been used as sharp-edged tools. The smooth pebbles, often associated with Fleurieu Swamps which mostly follow ancient glacial and fluvoglacial valleys, were split to make a sharp edge for use in a wide range of purposes.

In the Lower Murray region basketry was manufactured mainly from widely occurring sedge species, such as spiny-headed sedge (*Cyperus gymnocaulos*), hoary rapier sedge (*Lepidosperma canescens*) and sticky sword sedge (*Lepidosperma viscidum*) – species which occur in Fleurieu Swamps. Early records explained that baskets formed of green rushes were plaited by women, with the rushes gathered in bundles, and used whilst green and pliable. The records suggest these baskets were manufactured principally by tribes on the eastern side of Fleurieu Peninsula, with links to the Lower Murray.



Ngarrindjeri Elder Ellen Trevorrow teaches the next generation how to weave rushes

Image: [Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#)

Text: John Fargher Images: @nicolemotteuxphotography
This post especially informed by many papers and advice from [Philip Clarke](#), Ethnobotanist and Anthropologist.
A full list of references for this Post are available at [\[link to references\]](#)