

Cane Handles

by Ray Bub

I BEGAN producing cane-handled baskets in 1973 while sharing a pottery studio with Gordon Lavin on Cape Cod. We were looking through a Cleveland Museum of Art publication one evening and saw a photo of an anonymously made, 17th-century ceramic bucket with tabs for a rope or cane handle made in imitation of a wooden water carrier. At about the same time, the Cape Cod Pottery Cooperative had bought a large bundle of rattan cane for its members to experiment with, so we worked out some cane-handled basket designs.

Two years later, after moving to North Adams, Massachusetts, Susan Nykiel joined my studio, and in 1978, Susan and I set up Oak Bluffs Cottage Pottery in Pownal, Vermont, where cane-handled baskets have been a continuing production focus, and have contributed much to our business survival and success.

We buy cane in bulk from the Otto Gerdau Company (82 Wall Street, New York City 10005); there are other importers in the Northeast and probably several on the West Coast, serving mainly the wicker and rattan furniture industries. A 110-pound bundle contains

approximately 250 pieces, each 15 to 20 feet long. One bundle lasts us about two years. Our most recent purchase, made in the summer of 1984, cost \$210 for the cane and \$40 for delivery.

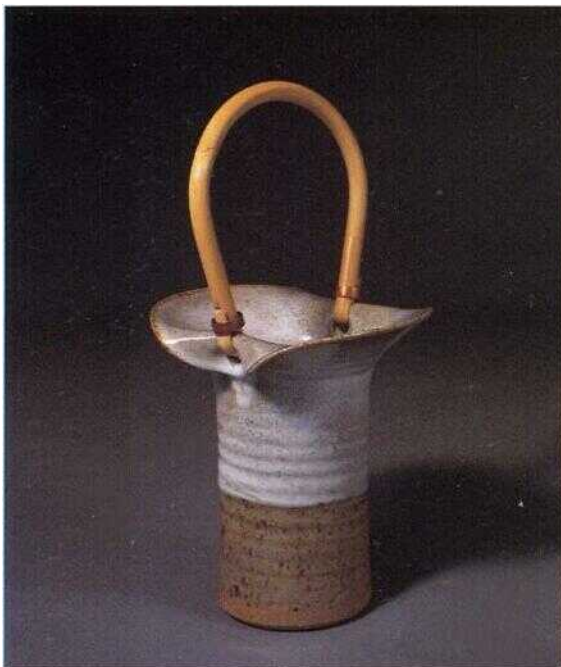
The cane is imported from mainland China or Taiwan. There are many different varieties, varying in stiffness, diameter and color. We buy 11- to 14-millimeter-diameter, natural finish, Kooboo rattan; that size was chosen to fit the retaining rings we cut from 1/2-inch copper pipe. Cane of this diameter is also thin enough to be bent without too much strain on the hands and wrists,



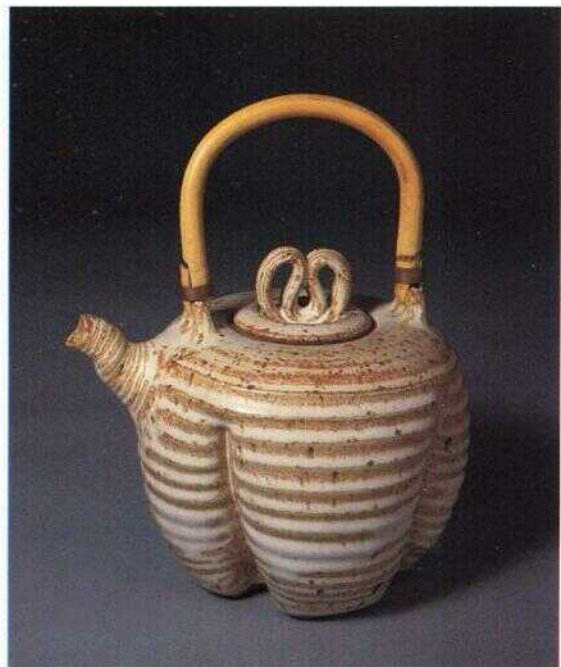
Cane handles are a production mainstay for Ray Bub and Susan Nykiel at their Oak Bluffs Collage Pottery in Pownal, Vermont.



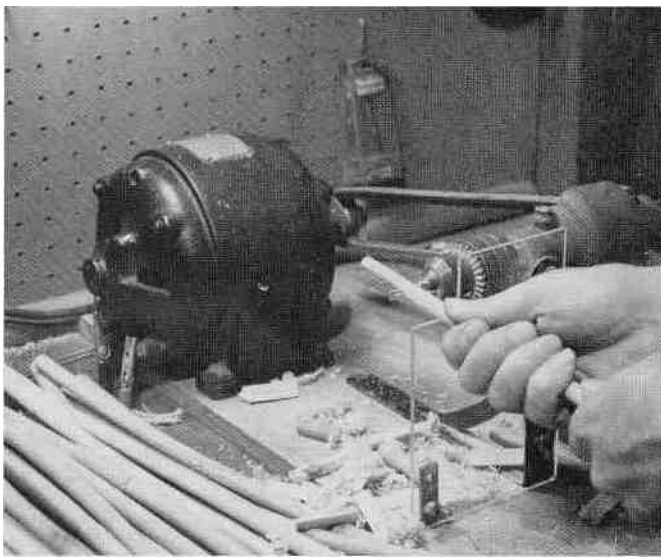
Cone 11 reduction-fired stoneware basket with twined-cane handle, 10 1/2 inches in diameter, by Ray Bub.



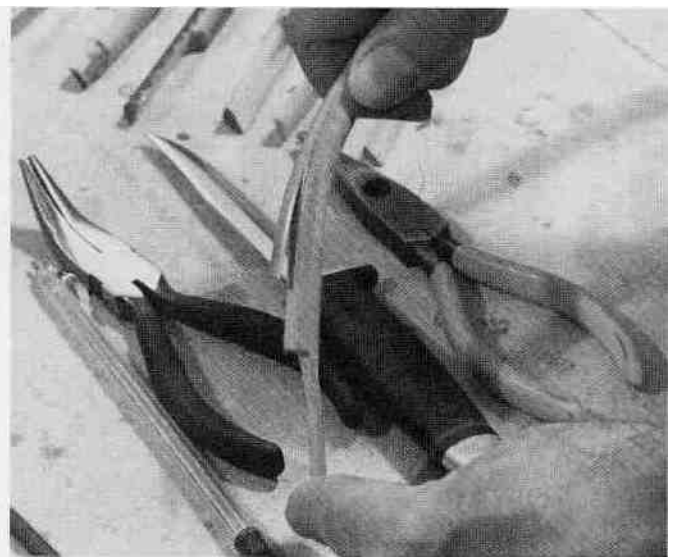
Cane-handled top hat vase, 5 1/2 inches in diameter, stoneware, by Susan Nykiel.



Wheel-thrown and altered stoneware teapot, 6 inches in diameter, by Ray Bub.



A router bit facilitates cutting the handle's ends to form doubled-back straps.



Don't make cutouts on teapot handles before soaking them because they may split, wasting handwork.



After soaking for two weeks, the wet cane is bent to an appropriate shape.



The doubled-back strap will nestle in an indentation carved above the routed cutout.

but thick enough to retain its shape in use. Rattan cane is very durable; we have never had a pot returned by a customer because of handle failure.

On receiving the bundle of cane from the supplier, I cut it in half with a chain saw. This yields two bundles of more manageable 8- to 10-foot lengths.

The first step in making a handle is to cut, with a hacksaw, an appropriate length from a longer section of cane. Various forms require different cane lengths; a teapot handle is 14 inches long, while our 6-inch-diameter hanging basket takes an 18-inch handle.

The twined-cane handles resulted from an incident we thought at first was a disaster. When an 18-wheeler showed up at the bottom of our driveway a year ago, empty except for our rattan order, almost half of the cane in the 110-pound

bundle looked too thin for our purposes. However, we needed the properly sized cane for orders awaiting shipment, and couldn't be assured a replacement bundle would be any better. So we paid the \$40 freight bill and resolved to absorb the loss.

Later that day Susan announced she was going to design some pots to make use of the thin cane, and I decided to work on some new ideas too. She came up with two new vase designs, and I developed twined-handle baskets.

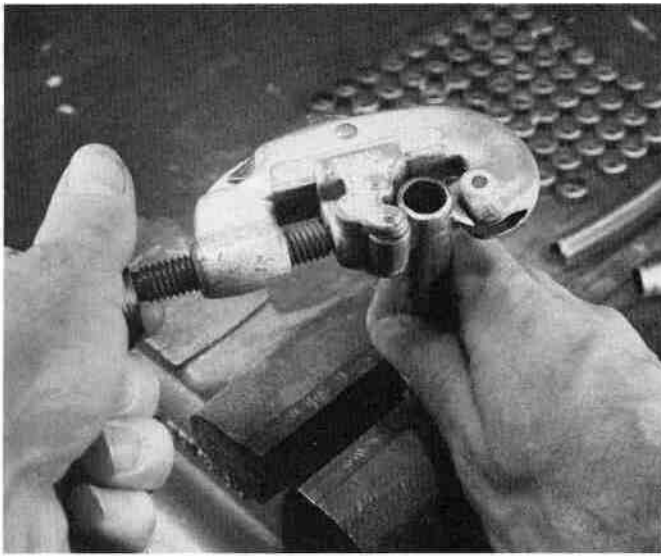
The twined handle required the thinnest cane in the bundle. We plan to travel to the warehouse in New Jersey the next time we need to buy cane to be sure we get some thin enough!

With the cane cut to the appropriate length, cutouts are made on each end to form the straps, which will be doubled

back and held in place with a copper ring. A straight router bit held in a horizontally mounted drill chuck facilitates this step.

We don't make cutouts on teapot handles before soaking them because bending the cane in the required tight arc often causes it to split, wasting our handwork. To avoid that, the teapot handle is soaked in water first, then bent to shape and cut with a knife on each end.

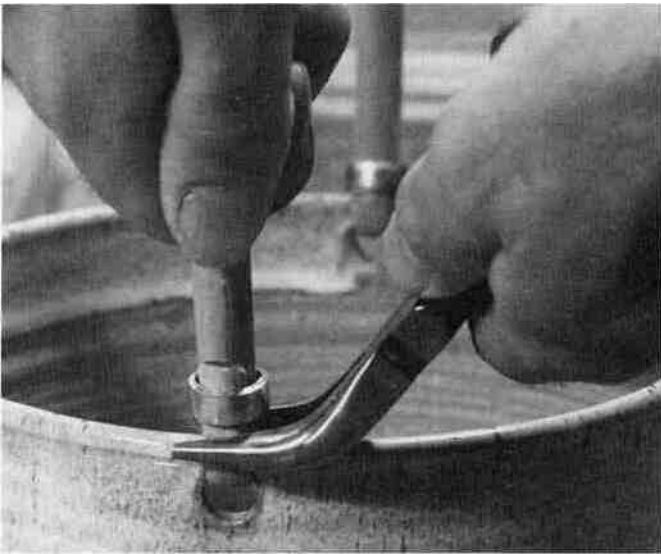
Other handles' ends are routed, then all are put into a water-filled, heavy-duty plastic garbage can and held under with a brick until they've soaked up enough water to stay under by themselves. A generous dose of Lysol disinfectant is added to the water to combat the ever-present, unidentified Oriental mold spores hiding in the cane, waiting for the moisture that will enable them



Retaining rings are cut from L-type (thicker-walled) or M-type (thinner-walled) copper tubing.



Folded over a ballpoint pen, the doubled-back strap is secured with a copper ring.



Inserted through a hole or lug, the strap is pulled up with pliers and held tightly against the indentation.



One side is pinned in place before twisting the two canes, forming a twined handle.

to grow. The handles should soak for two weeks to become uniformly flexible.

Before any other work is done with the wet cane, the handle is bent and held up to the pot to which it will be attached. If the cane is going to split or crack, I want it to do so before spending ten minutes fussing with the attaching straps.

Before the cane handle is attached a 1-inch indentation is cut on both ends, just above the handle straps, for the doubled-back straps to nestle into. The strap is folded over a ballpoint pen, then a copper ring is slipped over the doubled-back strap.

We use both L-type (thicker-walled) and M-type (thinner-walled) copper tubing for retaining rings because each type offers a slightly different inside diameter to accommodate the varying thicknesses of the cane. Before cutting

the rings, we remove any scratches or printed lettering with sandpaper or steel wool.

Galvanized steel electrical conduit can be used for larger-diameter cane, but it can rust and may not harmonize as well with cane and reduction-fired clay. Aluminum tubing should also work, and would be available in a wide variety of colors.

Attaching the handle requires some strength and can be dangerous—I've cut myself on glazed shards when a pot broke from the strain of improperly attaching the handle. Thin leather gloves will offer some protection, but they do limit one's grip on the cane while shaping the handle.

Holding the handle in its proper curve, attach it by inserting the strap ends through the appropriate holes or lugs.

Pulled up with needlenose pliers and held tightly against the indentation on the handle, the end is secured by slipping the copper ring over the doubled-back strap. Though attached, the pliable, wet cane can still be coaxed into the most pleasing arc to complement and enhance the pot's form.

A new cane handle exerts quite a bit of lateral stress on the pot until it accepts its rounded shape. When the handle is first attached, it might be necessary to span the bottom of the arc with wire, cord or tape to relieve the lateral stress.

The handle is allowed to dry for a few days before packing the pot for shipping or otherwise putting any strain on it, as it is easy to distort the soft cane. When the handle has dried and stiffened into the desired arc, it can be removed from the pot without losing its shape.