

FIBRE AND CLAY IN THE WILD

Words by Holly Foat
Photography by Native Hands

Wild. The very word conjures up images of trees, woodlands, animals and nature, an environment far removed from most people's everyday lives. But not for Ruby Taylor. Wild is her domain, her workplace and her home from home. Ruby isn't a wild woman of the woods though, she's an artist and a teacher with an understanding of the connections between the environment and the materials we use. Ruby lives in the market town of Lewes, in the South Downs National Park, where she can see the Downs from her back garden.

Ruby works from her studio space in a converted wooden shed in her garden but is often out in the woods foraging and making. Her studio is full of baskets and pottery, there are rolls and bundles of various plant fibres everywhere, and they fill the space with a beautiful earthy scent. She has a big sturdy workbench under the windows made from reclaimed timber. When Ruby works in there, she says time disappears. "My practice, working with plant fibres and clay, is concerned with origins and connection, with the beauty of natural materials and an immersion in the sensory experience of making."

Ruby is a rare find, she not only creates in the outside in the wild, using materials from that environment (you can see some of her work at Kew Gardens), but she also teaches others how to do the same, and reconnect with the nature. Ruby's Native Hands courses are wild crafts taught in the woods. The materials are local sourced (read foraged) and used to create beautiful naturally crafted items such as baskets and pots. These courses keep traditional knowledge, skills and wisdom alive and offer a connection to both the people of the past and the artisan makers of the future.

MATERIALS

Ruby tells me that it's really important that the materials are sourced in the same environment in which she works. She has a mind map of the landscape around where

she lives, extending to approximately a 10 mile radius. Through sourcing most of her materials by foraging, she has developed a knowledge and an intimate relationship with the landscape. She reads the signs around her, getting an idea of what's happening in the current growing season compared to the last one, which places are ready to forage from, which places need to be left alone until next year. This relationship and connection is central to her practice, both for practical and ethical reasons. "I see it partly as a care-taking role, it's really important to me that it's not exploitative or unsustainable in any way" Ruby explains.

Some of Ruby's materials are rather unusual. She makes baskets from brambles, needles from bones and wild string. All foraged of course. I asked what it's like to use brambles and Ruby explains that, "once you've knocked off the prickles, bramble is amazing to work with because the fibres are so strong, and good for weaving or making into cordage." She tells me that the string (cordage) can be made from lots of different plants, "anything that has long strong fibres; from garden plants like iris and daylily, to wild plants like bramble and nettle."

It takes Ruby eight hours to cut and shape a needle from a foraged bone. "They're very different from the steel needles people use today for sewing. Often a hole is made first, with a sharp tool called an awl, and then the needle's passed through the hole." She uses the bone needle to stitch baskets together using foraged plant fibres. These fibres have to be dried after harvesting and stored, then just dampened before use to make pliable again. She also works with bark, leaves, grass and flint. Almost anything she can find in the environment, she can find a use for. Ruby tells me that "at the moment I'm really enjoying working with English rush because it's particularly versatile. But often my favourite is whatever I'm working with at the time". It's not always straightforward though. She says it always takes time, practice and patience to understand how to work with a material, so it can feel like a struggle sometimes when you're getting to know a plant and its particularities in terms of how to prepare and handle it.

NATURE

Ruby's work means she's outside a lot. I ask her how she copes with bad weather. "There's a saying that there's no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing." She explains that working in the woods isn't safe in high winds and some tools are dangerous to use when they are wet but mostly the weather doesn't stop her. As I anticipated, Ruby relishes being outside "I feel really enriched by being out in the weather, whatever it's doing, I love feeling the elements." The Native Hands workshops run whatever the weather too, Ruby has a tarpaulin hung up to provide some shelter. "A participant on a Bramble Basket making course said this: 'Feeling the rain on your face makes you feel alive; hearing birdsong, you share the bird's vitality and zest for life.' I love that."





TRAVEL

The *Native Hands* courses that Ruby runs vary from basketry and bone needles to wild pottery and fire making. The courses offer complete escapism from modern life, combined with the satisfaction of learning a skill. People come from all over the UK to attend these courses, Ruby tells me that she recently had someone from Belgium who travelled specifically to attend the course. "I love the variety of people who come on my courses. This last weekend there was a computer programmer, a gardener, school teachers, artists, an archaeologist, a musician, a medical herbalist, college students."

Perhaps it's due to my bias towards natural and heritage crafts, but I feel that the environment is playing a greater role in today's creative arts. Ruby agrees "I think there are many reasons why but perhaps the root of it is that we need to use our hands to create. It's what makes us human, and in a more digitalised and mechanised world we're realising that something is seriously missing. There seems to be a great longing and need to reconnect to nature and working with our hands, to the beauty of natural materials and an understanding of their provenance. I have people come on my woodland course because they know it helps their mental health in a profound way."

I can't help but picture Ruby working away in the woods in a beautifully serene and peaceful scene, a stark contrast to many of our chaotic work/home lives. She tells me that it isn't always like this "I'm not an especially patient person by nature so working with these kinds of materials and process teaches me a lot about being patient, methodical and analytical about difficulties in making. The very first time I first tried to make a basket I got so frustrated I had my head on the table at one point, crying. But once you're competent with a material and a technique, it's possible at times to slip into a rhythm

of making that people describe as being in the flow, in the zone. That's when normal time seems to stop and often at those times I feel a strong connection to being in an ancestral lineage of makers."

With the current global focus on minimising waste and recycling, I asked Ruby about the end of life of the things she makes. "I have a compulsion, a need, to make things but I don't want to add to all the stuff that's already filling up landfill and incinerators. I don't want to use materials or processes that are polluting in any way. I want to have a small footprint and ideally a circular model of working." She's referring to circular economy of course, which takes inspiration from nature. The way a seed grows to a tree, and the tree decomposes back and feeds the soil when it dies, leaving no waste, in a closed loop. Ruby's work reflects this perfectly, using only natural foraged materials that will break down over time and return to the earth. This is the holy grail of sustainable crafts; zero waste and truly inspiring. 🍎

Ruby's *Native Hands* courses can be booked via her website at www.nativehands.co.uk



FIND IT ONLINE

Website: www.nativehands.co.uk

Facebook: [@native.hands.uk](https://www.facebook.com/nativehands)

Instagram: [@nativehands.uk](https://www.instagram.com/nativehands)

