

a voice
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Celebrating natives
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Paper From the Prairie?

By Barbara Bray



Depending on what you use in your "paper recipe" you can get all kinds of interesting textures in your handmade paper. Image courtesy: www.javajane.co.uk.

Not long ago, the "ragman" wandered the streets of America, collecting old clothing and rags to sell to the paper mills. The cotton and linen clothes were cut up and pounded by hammermills into fibers for making "rag" paper – an early form of recycling. By the mid 1800s, however, a lack of cotton combined with a growing use of paper led people to seek out a new source of fiber: trees. Now we are surrounded by paper, and with this bounty come concerns about the environment and throwing this resource away. Paper recycling in the United States currently recovers about 50% of paper used each year, but the demand for paper is outpacing the supply of fiber once again. Is there a new source of fiber for the future?

In the early 1990s, Resource Efficient Agricultural Production (REAP)-Canada began studying the suitability of switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) as a source of pulping material for paper. Switchgrass stems can be easily processed and pulp yields are similar to wood. Studies done by pulp and paper companies indicate that a mixture of switchgrass and wood fibers produces fine quality papers. Paper is not the only benefit derived from switchgrass. This wonderful native grass can also be used as a bio-fuel to produce electricity, can be burned in pellet or log form in fireplaces or stoves, or turned into ethanol, animal bedding, or mulch for mushroom growers. Planted as buffer strips, it will reduce run-off from farm fields and help prevent erosion. It seems that switchgrass might be the solution to many problems.

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Most children are familiar with saving newspapers from their own households for recycling. Less familiar is the process of making paper. With a few supplies, you can make recycled paper at home (see below). Include bits of flowers, leaves, seeds, or other plant fibers from your native garden for an interesting touch.

Supplies needed:

Blender
5 cups of water
Large square pan at least 3 inches deep
2-1/2 pages of newspaper
Piece of wood about the same size as your pan
Piece of metal window screen that fits in the pan
Whole section of newspaper

Instructions:

Tear the 2-1/2 pages of newspaper into small pieces and put them in the blender. Add the water. Put the blender cover on and blend it until the mixture turns pulpy. Pour

about 1 inch of water into your pan, and put the screen in the water. Pour one cup of the pulp mixture over the screen and spread it out with your hand. Lift the screen out of the pan and let the water drain. Open up the newspaper section to the middle and place the screen with the pulp on it. Close the newspaper of the top of the screen. Carefully flip the newspaper over so that the screen is on top of the pulp. Place a board on top of the newspaper section and press to squeeze out as much water as possible. Open up the newspaper and remove the screen. Leave the paper open and let the pulp dry for one day. The next day you should be able to lift a new sheet of paper off the newspaper!

For a more complicated project making paper from prairie grasses, see the web site for "The Prairie Paper Project" at www.cs.uiowa.edu/~jones/prairiepaper.

Barbara Bray is president of the Oakland (MI) Chapter.