

# Wheat Weaving Activity

## History

Objects made from dried straw are known to have been made in earliest civilizations. They were made as long ago as 5000 years. They are found in various forms all over the world. Evidence of them have been found throughout Europe, Asia, North and South America. Harvest rituals occurred in every country where grain is grown in order to please the spirits of the crop. They were generally made as fertility symbols to insure prosperity and good luck in the next growing season. After the last sheaf of the harvest was cut it would be made into a "corn dolly" and great feasting and celebration would take place. Ceres, the goddess of the harvest, was thought to live in the "corn dollies" which were kept indoors during winter to protect the goddess. The objects made with the heads of grain still on the stem were hung on inside walls where they safely made it through the winter. These sacred grains were then planted the next season to assure the fertility of the entire crop.

The straw most commonly used to make corn dollies is wheat. The straw should have a hollow center. Oats, rye, barley and corn can also be used. The British lump all of these grains into the generic term "corn". The word doll or dolly is in fact a corruption of the word "idol". Corn dollies are not necessarily made in the form of dolls, but in a number of traditional, often symbolic shapes. Examples of corn dollies have been found in Mexico in the form of angels. In England, different parts of the country made different types of dollies that have become traditional; the Welsh fan, the Hereford lantern and the Suffolk horseshoe are a few examples.

The ribbons used to adorn traditional corn dollies have different meanings. Red stands for the poppy and for warmth, green for spring and fertility, blue for the cornflower and truth, yellow for the corn and the goddess Ceres, white for purity and brown for the earth.

## Working with the Straw

Dry straw will split if you work with it. To prevent this, the straw must be soaked in water. This is called **damping**. The time it takes to soften the wheat varies depending on how dry the wheat is. Test the wheat by pinching it. If it does not split it is ready to use. Do not over soak the wheat as it becomes too soft to handle. Warm water will speed up the damping process. Do not let the ears' "head" get wet. Arrange a damp towel around the wheat while you are working. This prevents it from drying before you are ready to use it.

## Materials

- Wheat Straw
- Warm Water
- Old Bath Towels
- Plastic Garbage bags
- Natural Colored Raffia
- Scissors

Take a bath towel and lay the wheat on it with the heads sticking above the towel. Then roll the towel up and it is ready to soak. When you are ready to soak the wheat, just wet the towel and put a garbage bag around the towel to control the moisture. The wheat is usually ready in about 2 hours, but you could take as long as 6 hours before using it.

When you are ready to start braiding, unwrap the wheat and select the straws you want to work with. Remove any leaves that are around the straw. You are ready to work.

### **Braiding Wheat and Forming Designs**

There are many traditional designs for Com Dollies. The original purpose of Com Dollies was to create a decorative design as an offering to insure the fertility of the new crop. With this in mind, any design constructed from grain straw is a true Com Dolly. Braiding the straws and shaping the braid into designs creates a very easy and decorative Com Dolly.

### **Three Straw Braid**

Instructions: Select straws with the heads on. Try to match the size of the wheat heads as well as the straw length. Remove any leaves from the stem.

1. Tie three straws together at the head with raffia.  
Using the traditional braid, begin by bringing the outside left straw over middle straw.  
Then, bring outside right straw over middle straw.  
Repeat until the straws are completely braided.
2. Tie the end of the straws together with raffia. Do not trim raffia.  
Form the long braided stems into a design.  
Tie the stems in the design form using the raffia.  
Now trim stems.

Note: When you are finished be sure to arrange the heads of wheat in an attractive manner for drying (i.e. fan them out). Once it has dried, it cannot be rearranged.

