Paper-making with Charles Bran

In Britain the monasteries were the first to experiment with making paper. The abbots used bramble leaves because these can be picked all year round and are easily stored. Paper can be made from all sorts of vegetable matter. Onions and shallots only take 15 minutes cooking to break down but you need a good cardboard box full to make one A3 sheet of paper. Shallots make a stunning paper. Seaweed is also a good base. Celery (leaves and stalks) make a see-through paper. We used pampas grass which gives similar results to the reeds found near the Little Ouse. 2kg makes about 100 A5 sheets of paper.

To make paper:

Cut the dry plant material no smaller than 2-4 inches and put in a large cooking pot (about 20 litres) with an equal amount of water (but not too near the top of the pot) and bring to the boil.

If in a hurry add caustic soda (about 100g no more*) and stir in or use wood ash (sprinkle about 2-3 inches deep on the top and stir in) but cooking could take all day (12 hours). The caustic soda method takes 2 hours to break down the plant matter. Some salts such as sea salt can also be used.

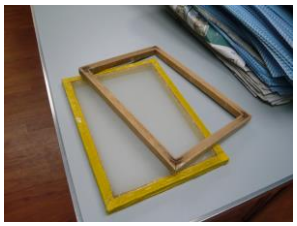
Once the cooking is finished, line a colander with muslin and pour the plant material in, allowing the cooking water to drain away.

Rinse thoroughly with cold water or the paper will be lumpy and you need to get any black bits out. Then put it back in an empty pan, put in 2 kettles of boiling water and add 100ml bleach. (The amount is dependent on how pale a paper you require.) Leave this for about 5 mins then put back into the muslin-lined colander and rinse in cold water and squeeze in the muslin to get rid of the bleach. [At this stage you can the store the cooked material in a container in the fridge. It will keep for up to 3 months. Reheat it in hot water before using.]

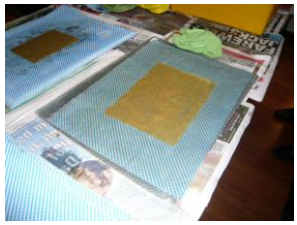
Put a handful of the prepared plant material into a blender and fill the blender halfway with boiling water. Put a towel over the top and a towel underneath and blend for 5 seconds. If the plant material is

small enough it should not catch round the cutters but watch out for this. Put the blended mixture into a coolbox to keep it hot and work through the rest of the material, blending a handful at the time until it has all been processed. Rinse the blender bowl between handfuls to get rid of any gunk. Once all the matter has been blended empty the contents of the coolbox into a vat wide enough so that size of the mold and deckle you plan to use can be laid flat into it. If there is any scum (which appears if you haven't rinsed properly!) take it off with a j-cloth.

To make the paper: cover a table with newspaper or waterproof material. Then take a thin plastic board (such as a cutting board) slightly bigger than the paper size you are making and wrap around a well-wetted (with hot water) j-cloth pulling it tightly over the back to avoid creases. Then place another well-wetted j-cloth on top. Give the mixture a bit of a stir and let it settle just a bit. Hold the deckle with the net on the top and hold the mold over this. To pick up the mixture put the mold and deckle at right angles to the water, bring it down on the farther side of the water. Bring them down flat with the mold on top and draw it towards you and then slant it and bring it up towards you. Some matter should have filled the mold. (If not put it back, re-stir the mixture and have another go.)



Once you are satisfied, take off the mold and push any stray bits into the paper shape. Let the paper drain over the container for a while. Move the deckle and rest a long edge on the wetted j-cloths, paper facing away from you. With a smooth steady movement, tip the paper the paper down flat onto the board. Use a damp cloth to pick up any excess water by wiping the netting above the paper but don't let it get too dry. Remove the deckle and you should have a perfectly formed sheet of paper on the board. Put a fresh j-cloth over the paper and roll it with a rolling pin. Turn over the j-cloth and put it onto a fresh board. Tap the j-cloth and peel off the original dampened cloth. (At this stage you can add leaf skeletons, seeds etc onto the wet paper sheet. Place a layer of 2-3 j-cloths over the piece of paper. Prepare other sheets



of paper in the same way, gradually building up the pile of j-cloths and sheets of paper. Once all the sheets are finished put another board on top of the final 2-3 j-cloths and weight it. Refresh the j-cloths each day and replace the weights until the paper is completely dry.

Other Recipes

***NB If you use caustic soda either measure the amount of water added to cover the material and use one tablespoon per litre of water or weigh the plant material and add 10% of the weight in caustic soda. Use a stainless steel or enamel pan. Caustic soda will eat aluminium.**

Nettles (Be very patient with this for good results)
Strip leaves from stems and use the leaves. Use bleach to whiten paper if required and rinse well. Result is a soft and silky paper. Use for writing or decoration.

Brambles Use leaves only. Use bleach to whiten paper as required but needs more rinsing than other plants. Can be used for writing.

Celery Use chopped stalks and leaves. Just cover with water but keep some by to top up. Use less caustic soda and no need to bleach. You can add cotton lint to bulk it out but put it in the blender for 3 sec only.

Seaweed Probably needs more boiling. Stir often. Just cover with water but keep some by to top up. Use bleach undiluted but rinse well.

Lavender Use heads and cuttings. Just cover with water but keep some by to top up. Stir often. Use bleach undiluted and rinse well Result very decorative.

Shallot Skins Peel one sack of shallots and use skins only. Only need to cook for 20 minutes. Stir a lot. Use undiluted bleach but rinse twice. Result rich colours and looks good under light.