

Making Lantana Furniture/Crafts

(in a small, village level unit)



*Around the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, Nilgiris, Tamilnadu
by The Shola Trust*

Overview of the Process

- Procuring (cutting/collecting from the forest)
- Boiling and de-barking
- Shaping , drying and assembling the furniture structure
- Binding the ends (with cane)
- Varnishing/finishing
- .. and that's it – happy selling!

Procuring Lantana



Procuring Lantana

- Raw material is abundantly (freely) available!
- Dry sticks don't work (break while bending), so fresh (living) bushes have to be cut. If they are left for too long, they have to be soaked in water for about 12 hours to become pliable again.
- Cutting in summer is hard, as the 'thorns are at their sharpest'!
- Older, well established bushes (2inch + thick stems) are needed for sturdy furniture, but even small twigs will suffice for crafts.
- Involves considerable labour, but not seen as a problem for the Kattunayakan and Bettakurumba communities.
- Needs to be cut on weekly or 2-weekly cycle, cannot be stored for long.

Boiling and de-barking



Boiling and de-barking

- Boiled (in an open, second-hand oil drum) for about 45 mins, and then bark is manually stripped off.
- Done half at a time (sticks inverted), giving the limitation of the drum!
- Bumps near nodes are also chipped away with a machete to get straight, smooth sticks.
- Some fuel (wood) source is needed for boiling, but if managed efficiently, most of the bark/waste twigs etc. can be used.

Shaping, drying and assembly



Shaping, drying and assembly

- Sticks are straightened manually (using a hole in a block of wood as shown in the pictures).
- For curves they are tied in place using thin metal wire/twine, and allowed to dry/set in to required shape.
- Works best when done while sticks are still warm/hot, may need to also be reheated if it has to be bent into tight circles, or will crack.
- Shaping needs to be done within a few days of cutting the sticks – they won't bend once they dry out.
- Should be at least partially dry (for about 1-3 days depending on humidity) and then structure assembled (nailed together). May crack if nails are hammered while still wet.
- Thickness of nails are important, will crack if too thick.
- For high quality finishes, it is best to apply a wood sealer and sand down before assembling (saves labour compared to sanding after).

Binding and Finishing



Binding and Finishing

- Ends need to bound, as the joins are not flush. Cane usually used, but some other plastic/fibres are also possible if cane is not available (though we haven't actually tried this).
- Wide range of finishes are possible depending on requirement. Ideally a wood sealer should be first used, sanded down, then followed with a polyurethane /shellac/ wax polish.
- A shortcut is 'touchwood' (saves labour, but plasticky feel), which seems to be a combination of a wood sealer and polyurethane. This is sadly the most popular!
- Compressor/spray gun can be purchased as (/if) volumes grow, but works fine with a brush!
- Can be stained to get dark wood colours too.
- Can also be painted with acrylic/enamel paints (after using an appropriate wood primer).

Finished Products



...and many, many more!

Some Thoughts..

..the small print (literally!), especially if you want to start a similar initiative

Seems like a dream project – remove a highly problematic weed and give people a livelihood. But all interventions (particularly with communities) are complex and we've struggled over the years! Some key things to consider:

- Funding is the least of the problems – it costs very little to get this off the ground.
- What are existing wages in the area and can you compete? (a dining table and 6 chairs will take 8 to 15 work days depending on skill).
- What are your markets? Urban markets could give higher profits, but are more risky/demanding and generally painful. Local, rural markets have much lower margins, but are often much more sustainable and robust in the long term.
- What is your business model? The three we've worked with:
 - You play the middleman throughout, bear all the risk and pay people wages
 - Give the community furniture orders (bear the marketing risk) and pay on delivery (and based on quality of workmanship)
 - The community independently runs the entire show
- We've used the second model most often, moving towards the third over a 3 year period.
- Is Lantana available within walking distance or do you need a vehicle to transport it? Do you have old plants with 2inch+ thick stems?
- And most importantly - do local communities really want such an intervention? Are they 'entrepreneurial' or do they have a more 'hunter-gatherer world view'? Is there a shortage of livelihood options or are you trying to convince them it's a good idea? Make sure you know the community well before you start.
- If dealing with the Lantana problem is your primary objective it's worth also exploring other more industrial scale interventions (briquettes for example). Furniture 'consumes' Lantana at a very slow rate.

But Finally..

Don't lose hope! It's well worth trying, particularly if you're happy to treat it as an 'experiment' and learn along the way!



Don't hesitate to get in touch with questions! info@thesholatrust.org; +91 4262 261752.

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