

Preparing Bamboo for Weaving

Several techniques and tools are used to transform raw bamboo into bamboo strips used for weaving. This is a difficult process to master: students generally require at least three years of training before they can reliably make strips of consistent quality. The quality of the final product depends heavily on how skillfully these strips are made.

The first step is cutting the raw bamboo poles to the desired initial length. One hand is used to saw the bamboo, while the other rotates the stalk to ensure an even cut. Next, the protruding nodes (joints) are shaved down with a craft knife (*kiridashi kogatana*) while rotating the stalk. If the final product is to be coated with lacquer or another protective substance, a curved blade (*migakisen*, or “polishing plane”) is used to shave off the stalk’s hard, shiny outer skin.

Next, the bamboo stalk is cut lengthwise using a bamboo-splitting knife (*takewari hocho*), which generally has a rectangular blade. The artisan makes an initial cut into the stalk using the sharpest part of the knife. Then the lower, wider part of the blade is pushed downward through the bamboo’s length to split it in half. Once a split has been started, the stalk tends to split with relative ease. Some craftspeople even hold the strips between their toes as they split them.

In some cases, the bamboo is initially split into multiple pieces using a tool called a *kiku-wari* (“chrysanthemum splitter”). It consists of a ring with blades running outward from the center, like spokes on a wheel. Held by two grips on the outside, the tool is pushed downward from the top of the bamboo stalk to cut it into equal sections lengthwise.

The third step is to further split the stalks to create strips. To prepare the stalks, the glassy outer skin is first stripped from the fibrous inner layer. Then the stalks are repeatedly halved using the bamboo-splitting knife until the desired thickness is achieved. A planing blade (*sukisen*) is used to further shave down the strips to a uniform thickness, accomplished by pulling each strip underneath a downward-facing blade. The strips are then trimmed to a set width using two short blades (*habatori kogatana*). The blades are mounted on the left and right sides of each strip, which is pulled through to finely shave off the sides. This shaving technique achieves more uniform widths than splitting.

These strips can be used to create many types of craft products, including baskets. When crafting a basket rim, a tool called a *mizo-kujiri* (an awl with a tapered, grooved blade) is used to temporarily pry open tight gaps so bamboo strips can be threaded through. A *hira-kujiri* (an awl with a flat, wide tapered blade) is inserted between strips of a basket after weaving is completed to reposition and straighten strips, tighten up uneven gaps, and correct any other inconsistencies.

Bamboo artisans must first master use of these tools and basic techniques before they can produce their own bamboo ware.