

THATCH

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

They use thatched roofs in England and places like that. The thatch is trimmed off so that the water isn't falling on the sides of the bundle, but is running off the ends of the thatch.

I experimented with thatch at the lake. I used tall, ordinary grass that was growing in a semi-swampy area by a beaver dam. It doesn't ordinarily grow on my place, except where there is adequate water.

I cut the grass with a small, sharp single bit axe. The stems are quite stiff and close together, so if your axe is really sharp, you can cut them off right close to the ground.



Oliver returns to camp with a load of grass.

Image:

The first thing I built with thatch was the outhouse. After I dug the hole, I cut poles and laid them on the ground over it to make the deck. I cut out two poles in the center to make a fairly small opening. Then I took a couple of short pieces of a pole and spiked them down to the ends of the cut off poles for support.

The opening in the center of the platform maybe 8" wide and 16" long—wide enough to hit it pretty easy, but not so wide that you have to spread your feet to squat over it. I flattened off the uncut poles on each side a little so that there is a place for your feet to set on, so as not to perch on a 4" diameter round pole.

I made a cover for it from some split boards or half poles nailed together on each end of the round side. It fit down pretty close between the two leveled-off foot pads, and was about the same height as the poles in the center.

I didn't make walls for the outhouse, exactly. I made the whole thing of poplar or aspen saplings, long enough that the tops could be bent over and lashed or twisted together. I arranged them in a semi-circle, with quite a wide gap left open on lee side. There was no door.



Image: Dorene Cameron Schiro

The saplings were 18" apart, dug into the ground a foot. It's hard to drive a sapling, so I made a hole for each one by driving a stake and wiggling it around.

I tied slightly smaller saplings running horizontally around that framework to form upside-down basketwork. I put the first course about 8 or 10 inches from the ground. Then, depending on what I had to thatch it with, I spaced the others so that I could tie the thatches on and have the tops hang down over the stitching for the ones below. Each thatch would overlap about half of the previous course.

To fasten the grass to the framework, I put twine on a fairly long net needle. I tied one end of the string to a horizontal course, wrapped it around a good sized handful of grass, shoved it in and around the crosspiece, and pulled it back out. Then I ran it back under itself so that it made sort of a half hitch. Otherwise it tended to pull a gap there between the subsequent bundle. Then I put another bundle.

The bundles were round, five inches or so in diameter. When I got them against the building, I straightened them a little bit so that it was thick enough to break the wind. They shed the rain quite well, except on the top, where it was too flat.

My saplings came to the top and just lapped over each other, twisted and tied. I put some big pieces of birch bark right on the flat top. If I were going to do it again, I would tie the tops of the upright stakes so that they crossed at the top, instead of having a flat place up there. There would be some rise on both sides.

The whole thing was only six feet wide, so it didn't take too much to cover enough of the top to where the rest would shed the water. The BLM man accepted the outhouse^{1,2} He

commented that he'd seen something similar in Japan. In some countries they have public outhouses where you squat.

I was in a hurry when I was building it. The most I was hoping for was just to get by for the winter. I wasn't thinking that either the house or the outhouse would be suitable for the BLM, since I got there in August and had a year to build a habitable house. I figured I could improve things some way to satisfy them. But he was easy to please and was satisfied, so I lived in that house for several years before I got around to building a better one.

I also built one roof that way. I had a big knife, and I had a fork that I made. I would take a handful and rake most of the leaves off it, trim the butts up true, and lay them on the roof. Those butts were what was exposed to the weather. That made a very good roof.



Oliver's homemade "fork" (carding tool, basically a comb). Image:



Oliver ties another bundle of thatch for the roof.

Image: ?

I put on a layer, fastened it down with a crosspiece, and then built up another layer on top of that, up a little higher. This second one came below the crosspiece that held the first

layer on, and so on up to the roof. At the last course, I used some birch bark over the peak.



The thatch-roofed doghouse. Note the bedding straw for the dogs in the loft.

Image: ?

I have also made up prefabricated sections of thatching on the ground. I laid the ends of several bundles of grass onto one half of a split willow. Then I laid the other split on top of the bundles, right over the lower willow. I poked my net needle down through the grass, went around the lower piece, and brought it back up around the willows. Then I went a little ways around again, so that the ends of the grass were pinched between those two splits.



Image:

The sections might have been three or four feet wide, whatever I could handle easily. I just hung them on the building or on one side of the roof. I drove a couple of nails in there and hang the sticks over the nails. Then I'd make another section and hang it up above that in such a way that it covered the sticks of the lower one.

I used a little net needle to sew those sticks together. I used a thin twine, which means that there was a lot of twine on the needle. I'd just give it a little twist to release more thread, and go on to the next one.

Sometimes I just used small poles for the walls of caches.



Image: Rein or Dyre Dammann

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) Bureau of Land Management. One of the requirements for proving up on the site is an outhouse.