

Phormium Phun

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Phormiums have been in and out of fashion over the years and are now very much ‘in’ with the grass-garden fad. Certainly many Hardy Planters will have the odd specimen or two. They tend to grow large with age. Very large. I find myself giving a drastic cut-down every few years to my twenty-year-old plant and am left with a huge pile of unshreddable and uncompostable leaves. It goes against the grain to just dump them in the dustbin (even if they would all fit in) – so, what to do.

The alternative name for these plants is New Zealand flax, and therein lies a clue as to their use. I’d read somewhere that they were once tried as a commercial crop for rope making (for some reason it didn’t take off) and I have found the fibres to be amazingly strong and versatile. For years I have used the dried leaves for tying-up jobs around the garden: you just strip off a strand of the required thickness and cut to length. I keep a dried leaf base, cut to about a foot length, in my pocket and just strip off strands when I need to tie anything. I haven’t bought twine for ages and the phormium eventually rots away if left long enough (especially useful for espalier fruit trees, etc.).

I also used it to make bamboo climbing frames (fig.1) for beans, pot plants, etc. – bamboo sticks (however many required), cut from the garden of course, bound at the top with phormium leaves. The phormium stays the original leaf colour for a while and then dries to a pleasant brown. Make a big wound-round-and-round knot for ornamental effect if you like; after all, there’s no shortage of materials!



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

One year I played around with weaving the leaves to make linings for my manger-type wall baskets (fig. 2). I just used simple basket weave with the freshly cut leaves. They lasted about five years! By then it was chopping-time again on an even grander scale. The new basket liners didn't make much of a dent in the enormous pile.

An idea had been brewing for a while that my shed needed a more ethnic look to blend in with the planting – the felt roofing looked awful – so I decided to try weaving a large mat to cover it. I have found that weaving the leaves whilst still green is easiest; once they dry out and become stiff it is impossible to bend them sharply enough for basket-weave. However, the roof-sized mat that resulted was very heavy – too heavy to put on the shed. More by accident and laziness than design, I just left the mat on a paved area for a few weeks whilst I pondered what to do with it. Lo and behold, the mat dried out dramatically to make a light, easily moved roof covering, simple to fix with cup-hooks screwed into the roof (fig. 3).

I even tried weaving a covering for some aluminium garden chairs, which I disliked because they were either very cold to sit on or scorching hot. I wouldn't say the result looked elegant but it did have the effect of making the chairs usable (fig. 4).

I don't know if anyone else has found novel uses for this or any other garden 'produce', but I had fun and also felt virtuously green by recycling what would have gone to landfill. 🌱



Fig. 4

Paul Ingelton's earliest gardening memory is helping grandma plant potatoes, and as a child he once had a huge of assorted tulips as a Christmas present. He has been gardening ever since.