

master class

Weave a rush seat

BY DAVID JOHNSON



Historically, rush seats have been woven with grasses native to wherever the chairs were produced. Cattails and bulrush were most frequently used and are referred to as “genuine rush.”

These days a common substitute is paper fiber, which is easy to work with and source but doesn't look the same. In between these options is pre-twisted rush, which I'm using here. Unlike genuine rush, it's commercially available. Although it's more challenging to work with than paper fiber, the look and feel of it are worth the extra effort.

Pre-twisted rush is made from seagrass and mimics the look of genuine rush. It's

Soak and staple

There's nothing too technical about beginning this weave. Soak, staple, and start wrapping.



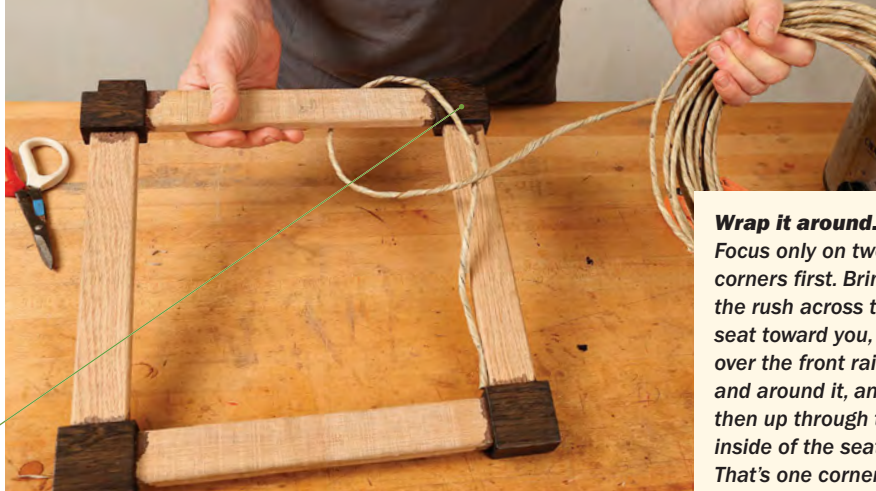
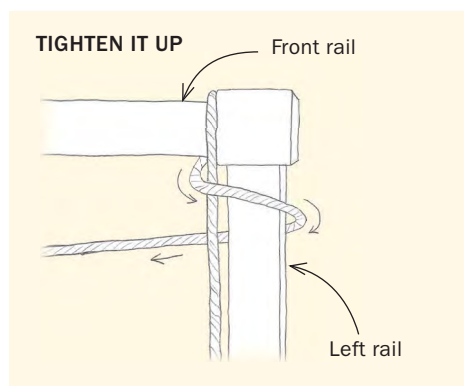
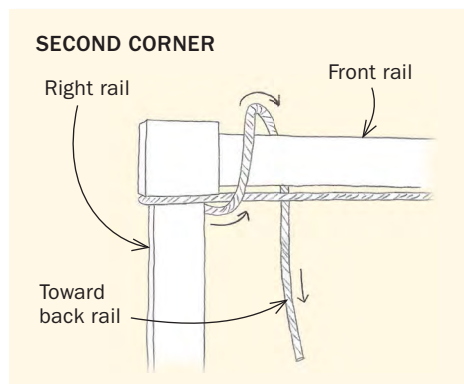
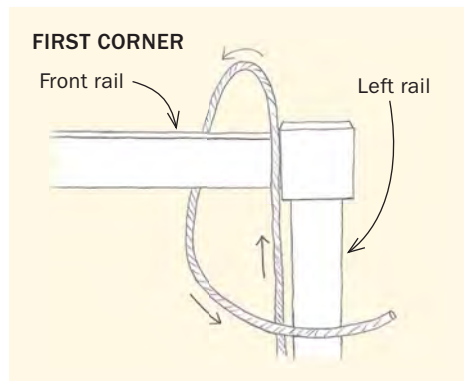
Soak it up. In an old slow cooker, heat water to about 100 °F—not so hot that you can't dunk your hand in. Soak the rush for just 5 to 10 minutes, or it will get mushy and unravel. Fling the water out by holding the coil up high and swinging it downward.



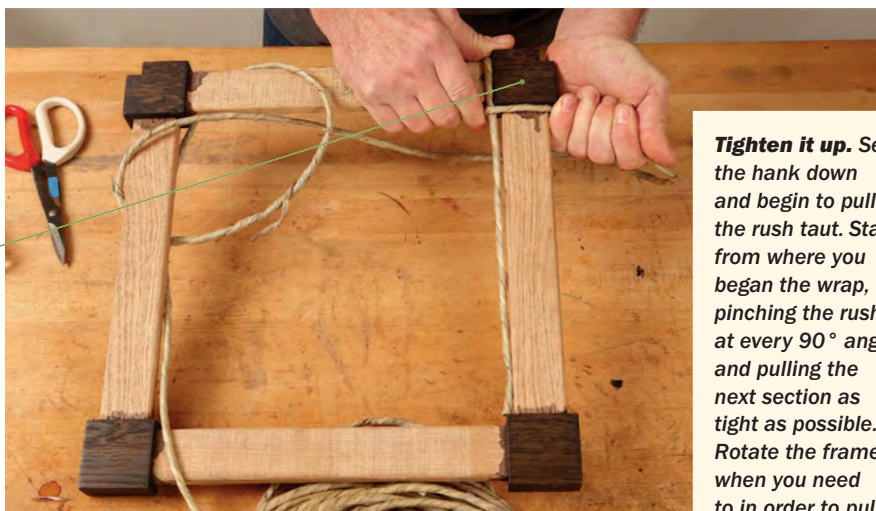
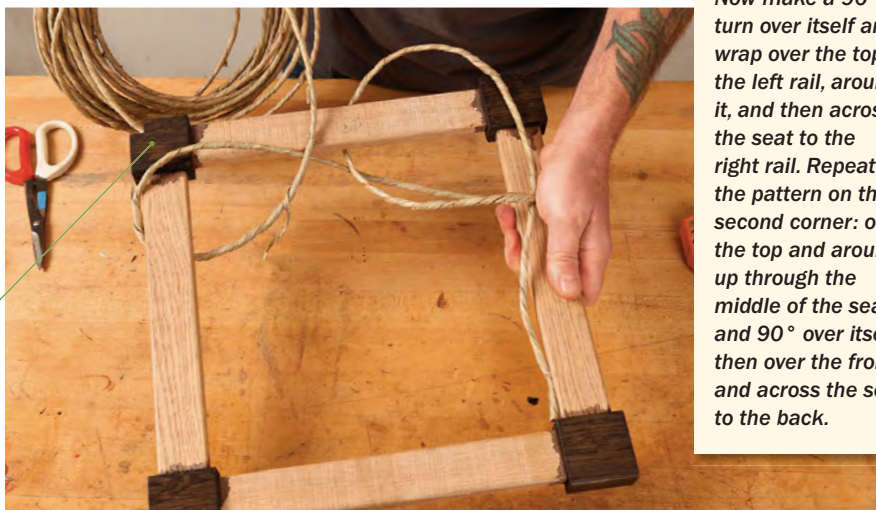
Staple it on. Nails don't work with rush, so staple it to the seat to start. Staple the rush to the inside of the left rail near the back leg.

Start wrapping

The trick is to work two corners at a time.



Wrap it around. Focus only on two corners first. Bring the rush across the seat toward you, over the front rail and around it, and then up through the inside of the seat. That's one corner. Now make a 90° turn over itself and wrap over the top of the left rail, around it, and then across the seat to the right rail. Repeat the pattern on the second corner: over the top and around, up through the middle of the seat and 90° over itself, then over the front and across the seat to the back.



Tighten it up. Set the hank down and begin to pull the rush taut. Start from where you began the wrap, pinching the rush at every 90° angle and pulling the next section as tight as possible. Rotate the frame when you need to in order to pull things tight.

available in 2-lb. coils in various thicknesses. The seat shown here is small and only required one coil in size #5, which measures on average $\frac{3}{16}$ in. to $\frac{1}{4}$ in. thick. The rush wants to unravel, so handle it with care and tape cut ends to keep them neat. I like to work with no more than 50 ft. at a time; for me, that is a handful as I pull it off the coil. Soak the rush for 5 to 10 minutes in warm water to make it more pliable and easier to work with. Soaking for too long or at too hot a temperature will cause



TIP When you reach the end of the run, use a clamp to hold the rush taut.

Rotate and repeat

With the first two corners completed, turn the frame and work on the second two corners.



After every corner, turn. Always rotate the frame 90° clockwise to tighten the next corner, rather than moving around the work yourself. If your body position stays the same, it will keep your movements the same and the final product more consistent.

discoloration, and the rush will want to come untwisted.

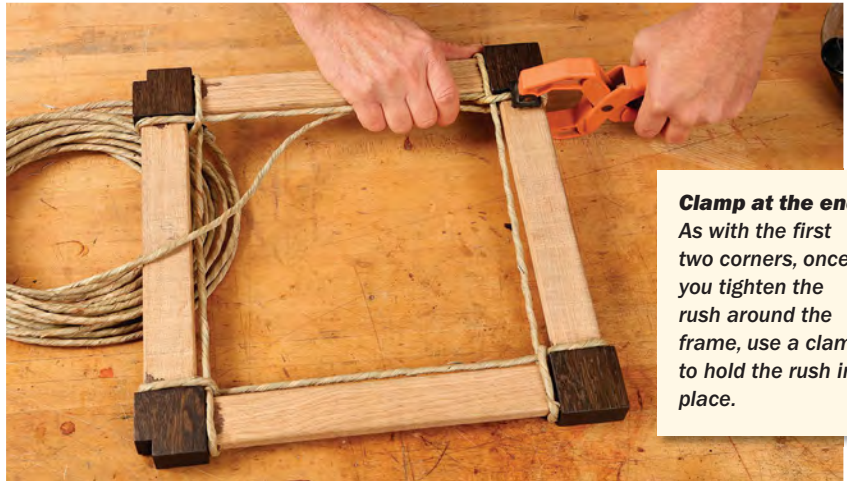
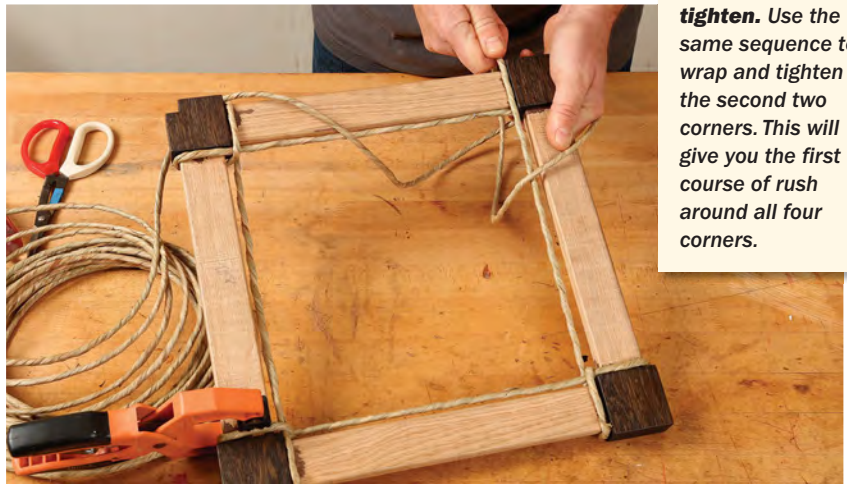
Part of the simplicity of weaving this particular seat, for Nancy Hiller's "Voysey Two-Heart Chair" (FWW #301), is that it is a square, which eliminates two steps—squaring the seat and weaving a bridge. I'll show you how to deal with those a little later, but for now I'm focusing on a square seat to give you the basic process.

Two corners at a time

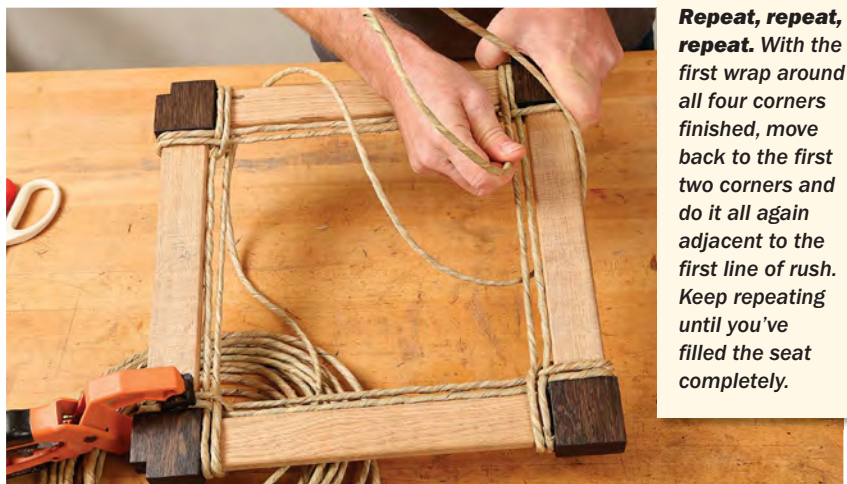
To make it easy on yourself, work two corners at a time, establishing the pattern loosely and then going back to tighten it. Facing the seat, staple the rush on the inside of the left rail near the back leg. Bring the rush toward you, over the front rail, and around it. Pull the rush up inside the seat frame, make a 90° turn over itself, and wrap over the top of the left rail, around it, and then across the seat to the right rail. Do this



Wrap and tighten. Use the same sequence to wrap and tighten the second two corners. This will give you the first course of rush around all four corners.



Clamp at the end. As with the first two corners, once you tighten the rush around the frame, use a clamp to hold the rush in place.



Repeat, repeat, repeat. With the first wrap around all four corners finished, move back to the first two corners and do it all again adjacent to the first line of rush. Keep repeating until you've filled the seat completely.

The end of the line

When you run out of rush—and you will—just leave yourself a bit of line and tie another coil of rush to it.



A handful of rush. When you've nearly finished the rush you've been wrapping, uncoil enough more to fit comfortably in your hand, soak it in warm water for a few minutes, then shake out the water.



Tie and cut. Use a square knot to secure the end of the wrapped rush to the new coil of rush. Pull the knot very tight, and then cut the ends, leaving about 1 in. extra. Make sure your knot will land at the bottom of the frame, not on the top of the seat. Additionally, you can often place knots inside the seat to hide them.



all again—over the right rail and around, up through the middle of the seat and 90° over itself, then wrap over the front rail and across the seat to the back.

Pull it all taut

Now tighten the rush. Go back to where you started and pull the rush tightly around the front rail and up the inside of the seat. To make the 90° turn neat, pinch the corner together while pulling it tight. Then pull it tight around the side rail and clamp it with a hand clamp.



Wrap and straighten. With a new length of rush attached, keep wrapping as you have been. After every few courses of rush around the frame, check that everything is square, lined up, and parallel. You can use a screwdriver to help adjust the rush.

Stuff it

Because the rush wraps around the rails, there will be empty space within the seat frame between the layer of rush on the top and the layer on the bottom. You must fill that space or the seat will be uneven and sag.



Corrugated cardboard stuffing. Back in the day, if you were weaving a rush seat, you would stuff the empty space inside the frame with more rush. Nowadays, the stuffing of choice is thick cardboard, which is inexpensive, plentiful, and much more consistent. When you're close to one-third finished, tuck triangular pieces of cardboard under the rush on the top and the bottom of the seat. Then continue to weave and tighten as you did before.



The home stretch. As you continue weaving around the cardboard, you won't be able to move a large coil through the center opening; you'll have to feed it through as a long strand. Handle it carefully, and twist it back together if it comes loose. It's even more important now to keep the lines of rush straight, parallel, and tight, adjusting with a flathead screwdriver as you go.



Turn the seat 90° clockwise and repeat. Always rotate the seat as you tighten so you treat each corner the same. Try to pack the rush as closely together as possible along the rails to prevent gaps from forming. Twist the rush back together as you work if it starts to come undone.

Joining two lengths together

You can't work with too much rush at once, so you will inevitably run out of material, probably more than once or twice. This is not a problem. The goal is to minimize the number of knots as well as to land the knots in discreet places and on the bottom of the seat. When you run out of rush, tie on a new soaked piece with a square knot. Hide this knot on the inside of the seat by tying where the rush goes across.

Some tips for along the way

As you weave the seat, be sure the 90° corners stay square. This can be checked with a square or by eye. Another way to check for squareness is to look at the cross-shaped negative space and see that all lines stay parallel. Any deviation from squareness can build on itself, so check often. It's difficult to make large adjustments on corners that have been tightened. Spacing can also be adjusted by twisting or untwisting the rush to make it smaller or larger in diameter.

The end is near

When you come to the end of the weave, you'll secure the end of the rush to the seat frame and refine the rush a bit.



The last wrap. When you reach your last line of weaving, give the rush a final twist or untwist to adjust its diameter for the space left. The rush needs to end on the bottom of the seat; fold it tightly from the top, around the side, and onto the bottom of the seat. Secure it to the frame, fastening it with staples. Trim the end to about 2 inches, let it unwind a bit, and use a screwdriver to tuck the end under the weaving.



Just a trim. With scissors, go around the perimeter of the chair and across the top and bottom, trimming off any stray ends you see. This will not make the whole thing unravel.



Burnish with a hardwood block. Work each quadrant in the direction of the weave to fill gaps by flattening the rush, smooth high spots, and tighten the 90° corners. It's subtle and won't fix large mistakes, but it certainly refines the finished product.

Each time you have gone around the seat twice, flip it over and check the bottom to make sure that it's neat and square. The bottom should look nice, too. Resoak the hank of rush if needed.

Add stuffing

When the seat is about one-third done, start to add the stuffing. Traditionally, seats were stuffed with the same material as the weaving, but today it's common to use thick corrugated cardboard. Stuff both the top and bottom. In this seat the rails are thin, so I only use one layer for the top and one for the bottom. On seats with thicker rails I use extra stuffing on the bottom to fill out the seat and make sure the sitting surface is as flat as possible.

Cut the cardboard in a triangle with one edge to the inside of the rail and the other two to about $\frac{1}{2}$ in. from the edges formed by the rush corners. Continue weaving, adding more stuffing as needed. With each layer of stuffing, cut the cardboard smaller while keeping the outside edge against the rails.

As the seat nears its end, the hank (the coil of rush or other textile) will be too big to pass through the opening in the middle, so you'll need to thread the rush through. Be careful, and don't let it untwist; you will need to straighten it out often. The last one or two knots will no longer fit into the inside of the seat and will need to be on the outside of the bottom. Try to minimize the number of knots here, and keep their placement close to the center to make them discreet.

Finish things off

Finish the seat by stapling the rush to the underside of the frame. Tuck the rush into the weave, but first unwind it some so it will be less likely to slip out. Trim any frayed ends. Burnish the seat with a block of wood, rubbing the seat in each quadrant in the direction of the rush to flatten out the strands and fill gaps.

Happy weaving. I leave you with two pertinent rush-weaving quotes:

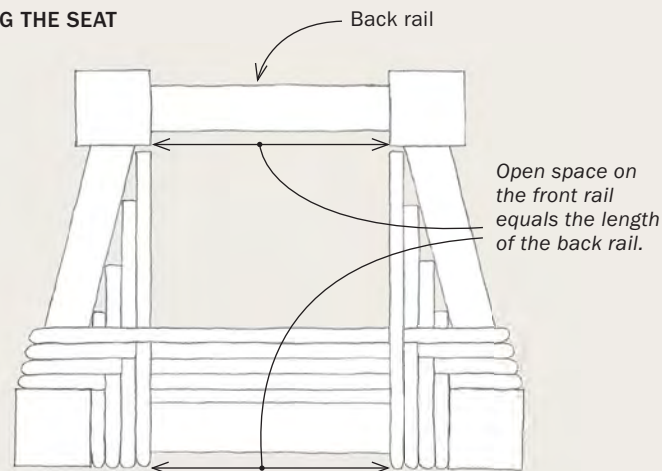
"Your eyeballs are your best tool." —Tage Frid via James Krenov

"Only fools rush in." —Elvis Presley

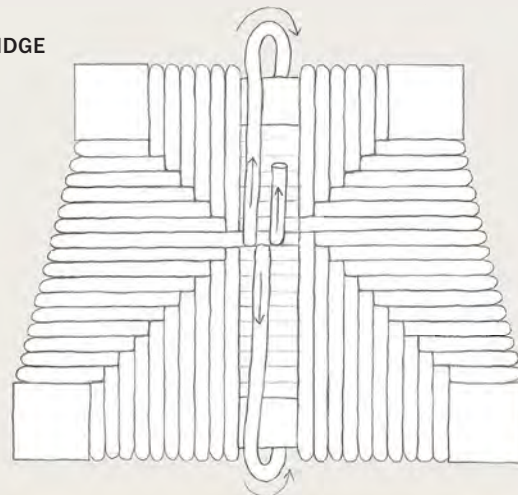
David Johnson builds furniture and teaches weaving from his home shop in Los Angeles.

Trapezoidal seats

SQUARING THE SEAT



BRIDGE



More often than not, the seat you are weaving won't be square. Since chair seats are typically wider in the front, creating a trapezoid, the corners aren't square. While the rush pattern depicted in this article requires squareness, you can use it on a trapezoidal seat frame by first weaving only the front two corners until the open space between the weave on the front rail matches the length of the back rail.

To determine that open space on the front rail, subtract the length of the back from that of the front. Divide the difference in half, and make a mark this distance in from the corners on each side. Weave only the two front corners, fastening the rush on the inside of the side rails. Continue to add courses until you reach the marks. Once you reach the marks, weave all four corners as you would a square seat.

Seats are also usually wider than their depth, so the side rails will fill up before the front and back have been completed. To compensate, make a bridge, which is a figure-eight pattern woven between the front and back rails, to finish the seat. Where the rush passes through the seat in the middle it will need to be tightly compacted together in order to get enough courses in to fill the rails.