

A Simple Steamer to Bend Vine or Wood Handles

If you go to the trouble to make fine teapots, don't settle for ordinary bamboo handles. Your options are numerous. There are a variety of thin cane materials that can be bent to shape after soaking in water. Tony and Sheila Clennell have done an excellent video on the subject. But some other materials such as thicker cane, natural vines, bamboo, and various woods need to be steamed before bending. If you go out in the woods looking for appropriate vine material, keep in mind that one of the most common tree-climbing vines in the American Southeast is poison ivy.

A student of mine named Graham Richardson got into making handles from natural vines, and wasn't satisfied with the degree of flexibility achieved by soaking the pieces in hot water. Graham came up with a clever solution. He and I talked it over in planning this device, and he went through several versions of the device before coming up with the one described here. This thing is about as simple as it can possibly be, and it works very well. The steam generator is an inexpensive electric vegetable steamer minus the lid. Search "Oster food steamer" at amazon and you will find an appropriate one for around \$25. One of the important features of this steamer is the 60-minute timer, but I can't help but wonder if anyone would really want to steam vegetables for that long. Well, yes, in hospitals and school cafeterias in order to blanch away every trace of flavor and nutritional worth, but they use big industrial units.

For a steaming chamber, you will use an inexpensive plastic storage box, available from any home-improvement center or department store. Purchase whatever size and shape of storage box is appropriate for the materials you wish to steam, but don't make it larger than it needs to be. With a Sharpie, mark a circle in the center of the bottom a little smaller than the top of the vegetable steamer. Drill a 3/8" hole inside one edge of the circle, insert the blade of a saber saw in that hole, and cut out the circle. Place an inexpensive wire roasting rack in the bottom of the box over the hole to elevate the materials being steamed and encourage good circulation. A row of four to six 3/8" holes drilled in each end of the box allows the steam to escape and further improves the circulation.

Don't fasten the plastic storage box to the top of the vegetable steamer. Just let it sit there by gravity. You don't want to do anything to confine the steam pressure. In this case, if pressure were to start to build, the box would simply lift off the steamer and release the pressure, so there is absolutely no risk. Do avoid contact with the hot steam, of course.

In practice, place your handle-making materials in the storage box, snap on the lid, fill the steamer reservoir with water, place the box on top of the steamer with the holes aligned, and set the timer to turn on the steamer. We found that 20-30 minutes is enough to soften smaller vines, but larger ones or pieces of wood or bamboo may require the full 60 minutes or longer. Once the materials have softened, bend them to the desired curvature, tie the ends with twine or place within a fabricated mold to hold the bend, and let them dry.