Preserving a heritage
River cane's return vital to Chitimachas

By VICKI FERSTEL
Suburban writer

GOLDEN MEADOW — Agriculture officials are trying to propagate an indigenous plant called river cane that has all but disappeared from Chitimacha tribal land in St. Mary Parish, threatening the tribe's basket weaving heritage.

Hurricanes, herbicides, soil erosion and the plant's tendency to migrate have pushed this wild native bamboo off the land of the Native Americans who treasure it.

Tribal artisans use river cane to weave traditional baskets that are highly prized by collectors and museums worldwide.

"When a patch (of river cane) would die out, you'd search further into the woods," said John Paul Darden, one of four Chitimacha tribal members versed in the intricate art of basket weaving.

The basket weavers now must search nontribal properties in the Charenton area — with permission of those landowners — to find this precious resource.

With the help of a federal agency, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Chitimacha basket weavers may once again harvest river cane from the ancestral lands remaining under their control.

In March, Chitimacha and agriculture officials transplanted 100 specimens of river cane from Charenton to the agency's Golden Meadow Plant Materials Center in Lafourche Parish.

There, horticulturists are cultivating the hardiest candidates to be transplanted in late October or early November to two test sites within the approximately 1,000 acres of Chitimacha tribal lands.

River cane is a type of bamboo or woody grass that grows in shaded or wooded areas on ridges or high ground near waterways.

Gary Fine, manager of the Golden Meadow Plant Materials Center, said river cane belongs to the genus Arundinaria.

The center's officials have not yet determined the species of the river cane, but they suspect it might either be gigantea or their samples may include two species.

"The biggest part of this plant is underground," Fine said of the plant's massive root system.

Fine said he and his staff are growing the specimens by two methods: by planting stalks with the roots attached and by planting pieces of the rhizome, or underground stem.

While they're determining the best growing method, they're also experimenting on the best way to fertilize the plants. What they know so far is that river cane requires lots of nitrogen.

Placed in the sun, the plants send up thin, short stalks. Placed in the shade, the plants send up thick, tall stalks to seek sunlight.

Basket weavers like Darden cut, split and peel those thick stalks into strips to weave into baskets. For a medium-sized basket, they may use 56 stalks.

The Chitimacha people, who have been making river cane baskets for thousands of years, have developed 49 weaving designs, Darden said.

The designs have fanciful names such as "birds eye in a square block," "worm track" and "rabbit teeth."

Darden displayed a woven tray with a design called "nakx" or little trout or perch in the Chitimacha ("Sitima'la") language.

Unlike Coushatta river cane baskets, which have color on both sides, Chitimacha river cane baskets have color on one side because the Chitimacha weavers peel the cane again after dying it.

In the old days, the Chitimacha people used river cane to weave burial mats, stor-
Chitimacha basket-weaver John Paul Darden splits a river cane stalk into strips, the initial process in making a basket.

The Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana is one of four federally recognized Native American tribes in Louisiana. The others are the Coushatta in Allen and Jefferson Davis parishes, the Tunica-Biloxi in Avoyelles Parish, and the Jena Band of Choctaws in LaSalle Parish.

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age jars and large work-related baskets, he said.

They used natural dyes from crushed clam shells for yellow, black walnut and elm bark for black, and a wild plant they called "pooch" for red.

Nowadays, the weavers make smaller baskets using commercial dyes and sell them to collectors for prices ranging from a few hundred dollars to thousands of dollars, Darden said.

Chitimacha baskets are displayed in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, at Harvard University and at the tribe's Cypress Bayou Casino.

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The 970-member Chitimacha Tribe is the only one of the Louisiana tribes still living on its ancestral lands. The other tribes either migrated or were forcefully resettled into the state.

Baskets play an integral part in Chitimacha culture and history, Darden said.

According to tribal legend, a Chitimacha maiden was walking along a path when an unfinished basket fell in her way. The Great Spirit told her if she wanted to learn how to finish the basket, she should return to that spot.

She returned, received the instruction, and then passed it on to her people, Darden said. Baskets also played a part in the tribe's recent history.

On Feb. 7, 1914, about 261 acres of what was left of the tribal land was put up for auction at the St. Mary Parish Courthouse in Franklin to settle a tax debt.

Sarah Avery McIlhenny, heiress of the Tabasco fortune and a collector of Chitimacha baskets and artifacts, heard about the sale and purchased the land for a trust. The U.S. government and the Chitimacha people later repaid her.

On May 18, 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed a law establishing the Chitimacha reservation with that land.

"It was through the relationship with the basket that our land was saved," Darden said.

The reintroduction of river cane onto the tribal property completes that circle.