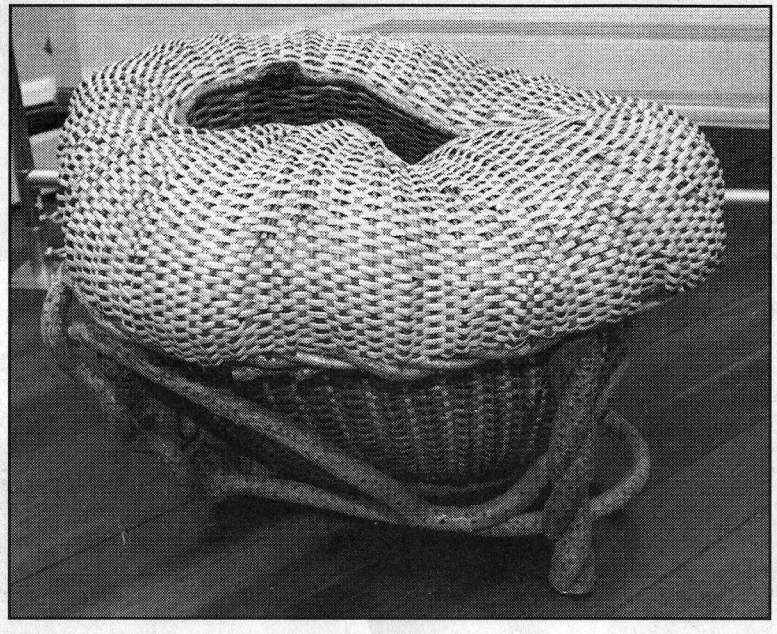
homes&gardens

WRITTEN BY **Daniela Forte** • PHOTOGRAPHED BY **Laurie Gaboardi**

Artistic Baskets From Winsted



Above right, Tina Puckett with one of her creations woven of bittersweet vine and imported reeds. Above, and top, detail on the base of a coffee table by Ms. Puckett. Right, another table.

No one should label Tina Puckett a traditionalist, especially when it comes to her intricate baskets and furnishings. These Medusa-style weavings are unique but can fit nicely into any home.

A Winsted native, Ms. Puckett began her foray into baskets 24 years ago when she spent her Saturdays in an adult education class to learn basket weaving at The Forman School in Litchfield. She began giving baskets as gifts but the point came soon enough when someone offered to pay for her creations.

Prior to discovering her hidden talent, Ms. Puckett had gone to college with the intent of becoming a theatrical set designer. It wasn't a false start, however, as most of the knowledge she obtained while studying set design has been incorporated into her pieces.

"I did a lot of construction, a lot of drafting and drawing. I learned scene painting ... then I learned about lighting," she recalled.

These days, in her works, she said, "I like to create light and dark and that's what you would do in a scene when you scene paint. A lot of that technique I learned there from scene painting is actually in my weaving."

Even the logistics involved in her former and current pursuits have a crossover element. "A lot of times we were on the road with the set designing, going from college to college doing a play. Breaking down and going is the same now," said Ms. Puckett. "That is the same thing I'm doing when I'm doing shows. I pack everything up, I go to the show and I put out my little booth."

Ms. Puckett credits living in Litchfield County for her unique style. Having woods surround her home led her to begin using the abundant bittersweet vine, which is

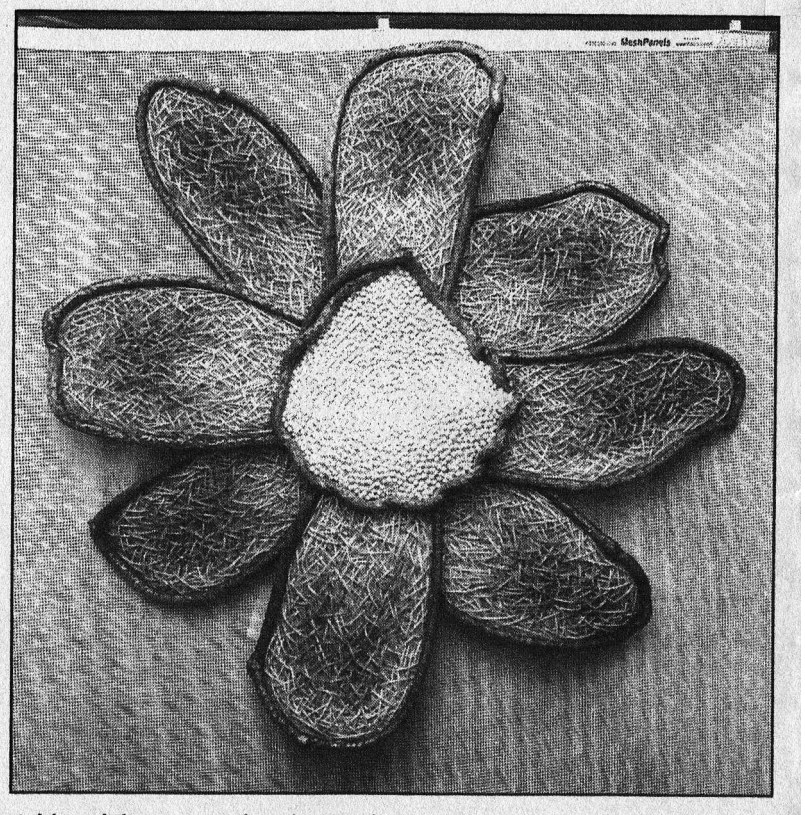
notable in the fall for the red berries that pop out from burnt orange shells. The plant chokes the trees in the area, and part of Ms. Puckett's pursuit involves unwrapping it from trees before giving it to a less environmentally challenging role.

"I came across a grape vine and so I started making the handles out of grape vine wreaths, and then I just tried to force it—the grape vine twists and it didn't look the greatest. One day I was harvesting the grape vine and the bittersweet was right next to it," said Ms. Puckett.

Besides the bittersweet vine, she also uses reeds imported from Hong Kong.

According to Ms. Puckett, the bittersweet can sometimes be heavy because of all the moisture it absorbs. She usually has to use the vines within a few weeks and shape them, and she then puts them out to dry for six months.

"Within the six-months-to-a-year-period you dry them you can't even drive a nail through ▶ 52



A blue daisy woven by Tina Puckett

◀ 51

them. [Working with it soon after harvesting it] allows me to manipulate it and then it gets very strong. I have to do it when the sap is still running through it," she said.

"Once I found the bittersweet, I started doing different shapes and then I started drifting away from baskets and creating other things that were coming from my imagination," said Ms. Puckett. "I mix my own dyes for the colors that I do."

'Once I found the bittersweet, I started doing different shapes and then I started drifting away from baskets and creating other things that were coming from my imagination.'

Ms. Puckett works out of the basement of her home and has a display of her pieces in her living room. She hopes to create a studio and showroom in a barn on her property.

For almost six years, Ms. Puckett had a studio in Litchfield, and nearly two years ago she closed it because she wanted to show her work all over the United States.

Aside from her baskets, Ms. Puckett has created exotic looking flower wall hangings, freestanding pieces and coffee tables. She has also created landscape pieces as a part of her design.

"I wanted to create dimension, texture and show light and shade. Through experimenting and knowledge I learned in scene painting I came up with my own technique," said Ms. Puckett. "It has benefited me because it accomplishes what I wanted. So when you look at the landscape or flower you see all three dimensions—texture, light and shadows."

The tables take about four to five weeks to create, and the process starts with sourcing the right raw materials in the woods. The first one came to life in 2006 and it sold at her first show. Ms. Puckett now travels all over Connecticut and the country and has done shows in Miami, New York, Rhode Island and Maryland.

Her inspiration comes from her imagination—when she touches the vine, she can feel what it wants it to be and that is how it gets its

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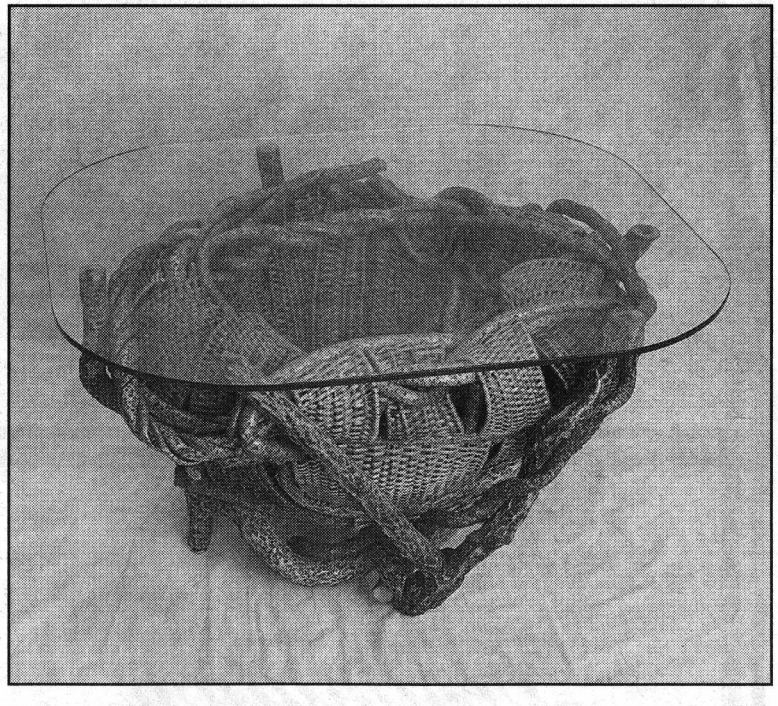

Above, a table, by Tina Puckett, and facing page, Ms. Puckett with another table in photographs she provided.

shape, she said. Some raw material just wants to become a basket, while other pieces suggest possibilities for elements of flowers, for which the designs come from the artisan's doodles.

Ms. Puckett discovered that making these pieces can be both calming and challenging at the same time. Her baskets can take five hours to five days to create.

"I find it very challenging, mind challenging, especially the flowers and the tables. It is all puzzles that you have to figure out and put together—it is not just weaving and thinking and daydreaming. I'm constantly thinking of how to solve it, and how to create it or how do I produce the next step of it," said Ms. Puckett.

Ms. Puckett has one rule that she lives by when it comes to her weaving: she will not start a new project before the current one is finished. When her weaving isn't working, she will walk away from it until the solution comes to her.

"There is something about finishing something too. Life shouldn't be all those loose ends," said Ms. Puckett.

In 2008, you can find Ms. Puckett's work on display at the Good News Café in Woodbury. She will also be displaying her work at the Beckman's Handcraft Show in Chicago at the beginning of the year. She also does commission work.

Ms. Puckett's pieces can range from $50 to $3,800. For more information, call 860-309-6934 or see the Web site www.tinasbaskets.com. ■

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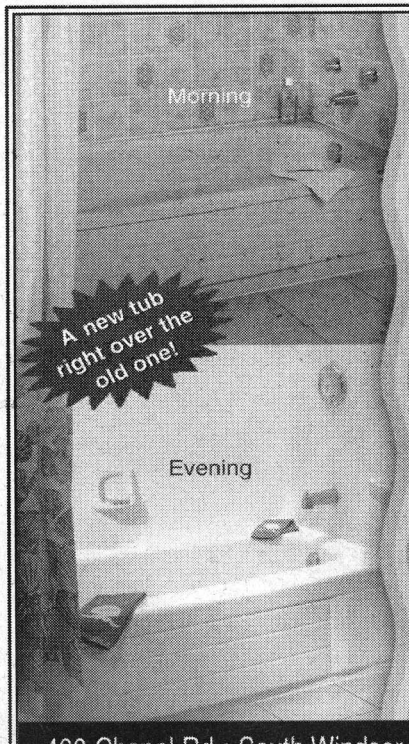

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