Plaiting Corn Dollies and
Harvest Knots

Weaving, fingerwork, busy fingers three dimensions and optical illusions of movement  turned from a flat straw-plaiting is a direct connection to the Celtic Spirit and produces an organic artwork which is virtually independent of time place and of material restrictions. Corn dollies made from wheat what the peoples of the  British Isles call “corn” have deep pagan symbolic roots .The harvest knot for men has no seeds but  the woman’s knot has them intact- its about fertility and the wonder of the harvest and thanksgiving. Perhaps the best known “corn” sculpture is the old hag or *cailleach* which is constructed  from the last sheaf to be harvested. It is blessed and carried by the lucky person who harvested it fore it is to give them good luck. Through time  much of  the pagan meanings have been forgotten, yet , the designs and the activity of plaiting persisted. Today harvest knots are made into jewelry- beautiful gifts for friends. And the designs and the craft- the very activity itself - timeless- continues to delight the crafter as much as the observer .Plaiting begins with a simple pattern known as the two plait which is also known as “cat stairs”.  From  completed two plaits one can braid ever more complex harvest knots and corn dollies of all sorts. Then with the concept mastered it is with a little practice that you will move on to the more   complex plaits and designs. You can do plaiting everywhere- the materials are all around you growing wild in nature or as simply found as a scrap of paper. (I always send my wife to church on palm  Sunday for extra palm fronds). For my classes- and for beginners I recommend a half inch wide and two yard long  piece of wallpaper.  In minutes you will have a wonderful  dolllie ready to present to your sweetie on the  way to the  fair!  I provide instructions below for doing a two plat and to the right you will find illustrations of famous Irish corn dollies and knots.   Take a moment to look up a few of the references cited below.  Enjoy your encounter with the ancient rhythms of Celtic antiquity- give your fingers a good time!-they deserve it!  For materials [click here](http://cbladey.com/harvest.html#Materials:) for instructions [click here](http://cbladey.com/harvest.html#Instructions:)

Materials:
I use wallpaper remnants. Cut them into one half inch strips of about 1-2 yards in length.
It is difficult to find straw but if you find yourself in a wheat field give it a try. The best straw for platting should be a longer variety. You should cut the straw when almost ripe but not totally dry-the first joint still green.  If the heads are bent the straw will be too brittle.  The straw should be dried in the sun for a day and then hung in bundles from a rafter upside down. When straw is dry take off the outer leaf. Cut the head off at the first node beneath it. Select straws that are similar in size to be worked together.
Palm fronds are ideal as well- but don’t let these dry out. I  generally plait mine before getting home after church on Palm Sunday.

Instructions:

1. Before platting dampen straws so that they will be pliable. Place the straw in a tub of lukewarm water for 20 -30 minutes. Keep the straw under the water so it is uniformly wet. Put the straw in a damp towel so it does not dry out. Be careful! If you leave straw wet it will mildew and spoil. Only dampen or “temper” the materials that you need. Of course with paper or alternative materials you will not need dampening.

2. To make a two plat lay the strip of paper out lengthwise in front of you flat on the work surface.

3. Find the center of the strip

4. Fold the strip so that it forms a right angle at
    the center point. Your strip should now look
    like an    L   .  Put it in front of you so it looks
    like    L.

5. You will notice that one of the arms of the L is under. The other. Fold that arm perpendicularly over the other.

6.  That makes the other arm of the L under. Fold it then over the other.

7. Repeat, always folding the arm that is under over the arm that is under.  Be sure to grasp the corner firmly and  hold tight.  Do this until the material is used up.

8. When you are finished folding you will have a squarewith two ends. Pull each end from the other rotating slightly to reveal the design.

Now secure the ends and present your ancient Celtic knot to your sweetie- and celebrate the thanksgiving of the harvest the right way!

**Sources:**
Coker,Alec and Doris Johnson,The Complete Book of Straw Craft Craft and Corn Dollies

Lettice Sandford,Straw Work and Corn Dollies

Joan Rendell, Your Book of Corn Dollies.

Kevin Danaher,The Year in Ireland.