

Paper: How is Washi Made?

Washi means Japanese paper. Washi has been made for 1400 years from the bark of three renewable plants, kozo, gampi and mitsumata.

The natural environments where traditional Japanese paper is still made are models of sustainability where pure water is crucial to producing great paper.

Traditionally, in papermaking areas of Japan, all members of the family, and the local community, would contribute to the process. In recent years, many bright young people, not necessarily connected to generations of papermaking families, are drawn to the craft by their passion for washi, and their recognition of the importance of maintaining its quality. Living in smaller, greener communities, they are strongly committed to their work and are very fit as a result.

The labour intensity of making washi requires many hands. First, branches of the kozo plant are cut annually after the leaves fall in late autumn. The plants regenerate continually for about 40 years. After harvesting, kozo branches are bundled and steamed for several hours to loosen the outer bark from the core.



Then, the three layers of kozo bark are peeled away from the core, which is used for firewood or local crafts. Many hands are needed to do this quickly, while the branches are warm. Isolating the inner most 'white' layer of bark requires hours of scraping away the other two layers, a job often done by senior family members.

To make the strongest, archival washi, the bark is cooked for several hours in water mixed with wood ash, soda ash or lime. This softens the fibre slowly while retaining its strength. The cooked fibre is then pounded by hand to produce the finest, strongest paper. In recent times, electric pounding machines substantially shorten the time required for this physically demanding step.

Next, the fibre is worked on for many hours to pick out all the dross, to ensure that the final sheet is perfectly even and smooth. Tororo-aoi, the root of a hibiscus plant is crushed to excrete a mucilaginous substance, neri, which is then strained. The resulting thick, liquid neri is mixed well with the fibres and clean water, so that the kozo will drain through the screen at just the right consistency to make thin, strong paper. A screen or su, made of needle-thin bamboo strips and silk thread, is placed into a frame and dipped into the vat of kozo, neri and water.

The wet kozo pulp is scooped up with the screen and gently tossed back and forth and side to side. The whole action is repeated many times for each sheet. This special wave-action technique creates the thinnest and strongest papers. The su is removed from the frame and turned face down, placing the new paper on top of a stack of wet sheets. After pressing out the excess liquid, papers are peeled off the wet stack one by one, each cohering thanks to the neri, and brushed on a flat surface to dry.

(This article is courtesy of Shirley Imaizumi, Japanese Paper Place (Canada), who reminds us not to call these rice papers. There is no rice used in making these papers. "It is a misnomer from the 19th Century when a lot of Asian treasures arrived in Europe wrapped in very thin paper," says Shirley.)