

Vegetable Papyrus Demonstration

Teaching Artist: Yuka Petz

hello@yukapetz.com // www.yukapetz.com // Instagram @yukapetz

Vegetable papyrus is a proto-paper made directly from fruits and vegetables. The process is relatively simple and allows for abundant exploration. Non-cellulose material is boiled out of the sliced produce. Then the slices are laid out in your design and restraint-dried. Drying the papyrus under pressure forms the hydrogen bond, which fuses the individual slices together.

Materials & Equipment

You will need to do a small amount of equipment preparation, mostly for the drying process. Fortunately, the few things you need outside of what you might find around your home should be available at most hardware stores and fabric suppliers.

For Preparing the Vegetables

- sharp knife and/or mandolin
- cooking pot (I prefer wider and shallower pots)
- strainer or slotted spoon
- bowl of cold or ice water

For Pressing & Drying

Press: A standing or nipping press is ideal and your design can be as large as the bed of your press. Be very careful to immediately wipe away any water on your press. You can also use C-clamps (I like the quick-grip style) around the edges of your press boards. You won't get as evenly distributed pressure as a standing press, so better to keep your designs on the smaller side. If you have an old flower press, that could work too.

Press Boards: Inexpensive plywood cut to size of press bed or what clamps allow. Coat with water repelling sealant. I recommend having a dedicated set of press boards only for making papyrus.

Fabric: Tightly woven cotton, cut to your press board size. Old sheets work great.

Felts: You need thick felts (or similar absorbent material) cut to the size of your press boards. Do not use good papermaking felts. Surplus army blankets are excellent. I purchased one military blanket, which cut down into plenty of pieces and I have used for many years, even with washing. Cheap craft felt is generally not your friend. You can also use chamois in place of felts.

Absorbent Material for Interleaving: Typically newsprint, paper towels, or a reusable/washable absorbent materials. Cut down to your press board size. You can invest in chamois for washable/re-usable material, but be prepared to have enough on hand to change out the drying sheets twice per day.

Layout Guide (optional): If I am aiming for a specific size of papyrus, I will trace out a guide on mylar which can then be held over my design to double check size. The mylar is easily wiped clean.

****Important Note:** If you plan to make papyrus at home, I strongly recommend making the modest investment in setting up dedicated press boards, fabric, felt, and chamois (if using). Vegetable papyrus is a wet process and can stain or damage papermaking boards and fabrics.

Preparing the Vegetables

Good vegetables to start with are firm when raw and soft when cooked. Zucchini, squash, apples, radishes, daikon, turnips, onions and peppers are all great to start with. Then experiment with hearty, leafy greens, such as kale or chard. I've had less success with vegetables with lots of starch, such as potatoes. Be mindful of vegetables like beets, which release a lot of dye and can cause staining.

1. Slice vegetables about ¼" thick. Once you are comfortable with thicker pieces, experiment with a mandolin and thinner slices.
2. Boil the sliced vegetables in water. Your cooking time depends on the type and thickness of the vegetable. Expect a cooking time of 2-10 minutes. When the vegetables are just soft enough to prick with a fork, carefully remove with a strainer or slotted spoon. **To avoid uneven cooking, do not crowd your vegetables in the pot.
3. Plunge the cooked slices in an ice bath and remove from water.
4. It can be good to let your cooked vegetables drain a bit, but be sure they do not start drying out.

**If your slices are on the thicker side, sometimes it can be ok to cover and store in the fridge overnight. I do not recommend this for very thin pieces of papyrus.

Designing and Pressing Papyrus

1. Arrange your cooked vegetables on the tightly woven cloth. Be sure that there is at least ¼" overlap between pieces. Keep your design within the size of your press bed.
2. When the design is complete, place another piece of cloth over the papyrus.
3. Carefully sandwich the papyrus and cloth between felts.
4. Place your felt sandwich in between two press boards.

Layers for Pressing:

Press board

Felt

Cloth

Papyrus

Cloth

Felt

Press board

5. Press your papyrus. I aim for as much pressure as possible. I have never over-pressed papyrus using a standing press or vice clamps. You don't need to press it for long. The strongest smooch you can apply is the aim of this step.

Drying the Pressed Papyrus

Your papyrus needs to be dried under restraint or else it will dry unevenly and may not form a solid sheet.

Drying in a Standing Press

You can dry your papyrus in a standing or nipping press, if your press opens wide enough to hold all the papyrus, cotton and boards. You only need a gentle amount of pressure for drying.

Drying Under Weights

You can dry your papyrus, fabric, and press boards under heavy books or bricks.

Drying in a Drying Box

If you have access to a drying box, you can dry the papyrus/cloth sandwich on pellon in the drying box. Be sure to double check and make sure there is no staining, such as from beets. Do not use with good blotters!

1. Remove boards and felts, but keep the papyrus sandwiched between the woven fabric. Be sure to rinse felts with clean, cold water and hang to dry.
2. Set out a few pieces of newsprint or a dry chamois on one of your press boards. Place one layer of your papyrus/fabric on the paper. If you have multiple layers to dry, interleave with more newspaper in between each layer of papyrus. Place another press board on top. **I prefer to add a press board after two layers of papyrus/cloth/newsprint.

Layers for Drying:

Press board

Newsprint/Chamois

Cloth

Papyrus

Cloth

(Newsprint)

(Cloth)

(Second layer papyrus)

(Cloth)

Newsprint

Press board

3. Change the newsprint interleaving at least once a day to prevent mold from developing. Changing the paper more often also encourages faster drying. I usually change the interleaving paper twice a day for the first couple of days and then once a day thereafter.
4. Your papyrus should be dry in 3-5 days, depending on humidity and how often you change blotting sheets. In New Orleans, there were times when it took a week. The papyrus is dry when it no longer feels cool to the touch.
5. Carefully peel the papyrus off the fabric.
**You can wait until it is dry to peel off the fabric. This is fine for thicker pieces. However, very thin papyrus, such as those sliced on a mandolin, can be harder to remove without tearing. I usually peel these after one day and then transfer to clean, dry fabric, before continuing to dry under restraint. The thin papyrus does not stick to the dry fabric as it finishes drying.
6. Depending on humidity, it might be a good idea to keep your dried papyrus under a heavy book or other weight for another week or two, particularly for very thin pieces.

DIY Standing Press Links

If you search for “DIY book press” or “DIY standing press” you should find a few different designs. Keep in mind that “press” and “book press” can encompass a variety of styles. Aim for a standing press or a nipping press.

Standing Press Design [\(link\)](#)

by Perry Nigro on Philobiblon (excellent general resource for book arts and book binding)

3 DIY Book Press Designs Worthy of Checking Out [\(link\)](#)

No instructions, but good photos of three designs with brief comments about the differences

Simple clamp press [\(link\)](#)

Where to Purchase Presses

You can sometimes find presses on Ebay or other antique or resale sites, or waiting in someone’s basement. If you want to purchase a cast iron press, start putting word out. They’re around.

Affordable Binding Equipment [\(link\)](#)

Various presses and other binding equipment that can be made to order.

Talas [\(link\)](#)

Supplier of book arts and bookbinding tools and equipment.