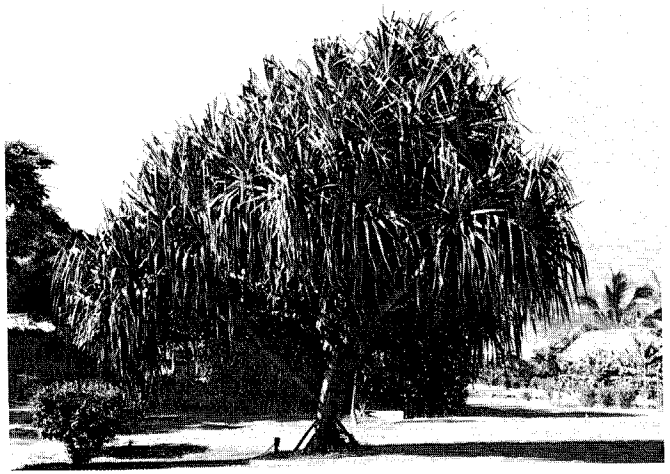
CHAPTER TWO

Selection and Preparation of Lauhala

"Dispersion of the Hala by Madam Pele." Linoleum print by Dietrich Varez.



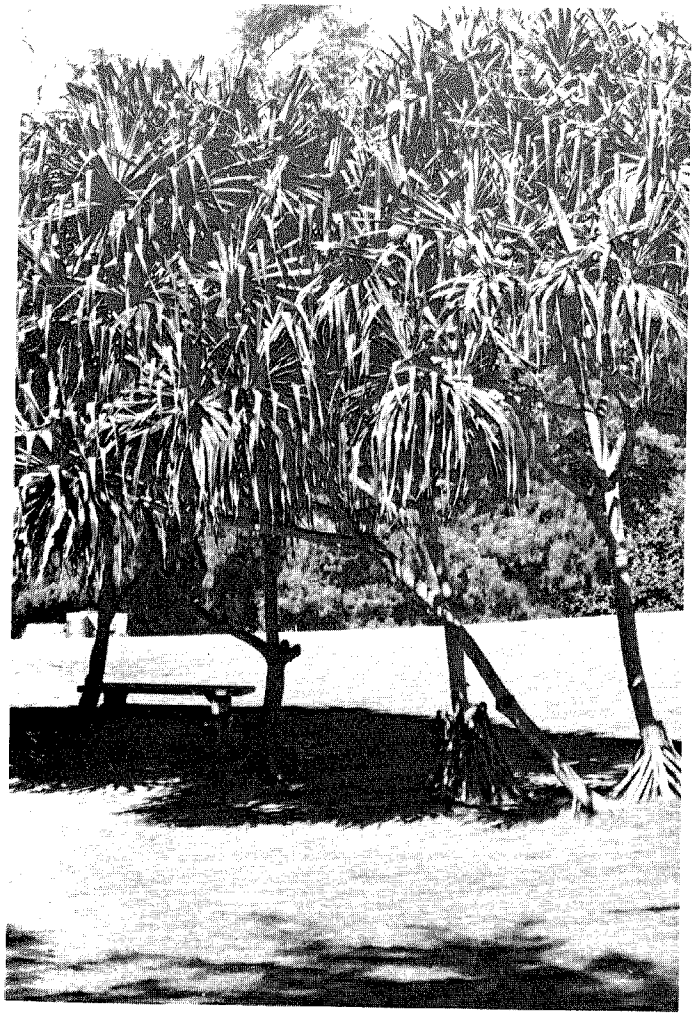
Legend tells us that when Pele, the hot-tempered volcano goddess, first arrived on the Big Island, her canoe became entangled by the leaves and roots of the hala trees growing on the shore. Pele was so angered by this rude greeting that she tore the trees into hundreds of pieces and threw them as far as she could. Wherever the pieces landed they grew into new trees. This, according to the story, is the reason for the widespread presence of hala in the islands.

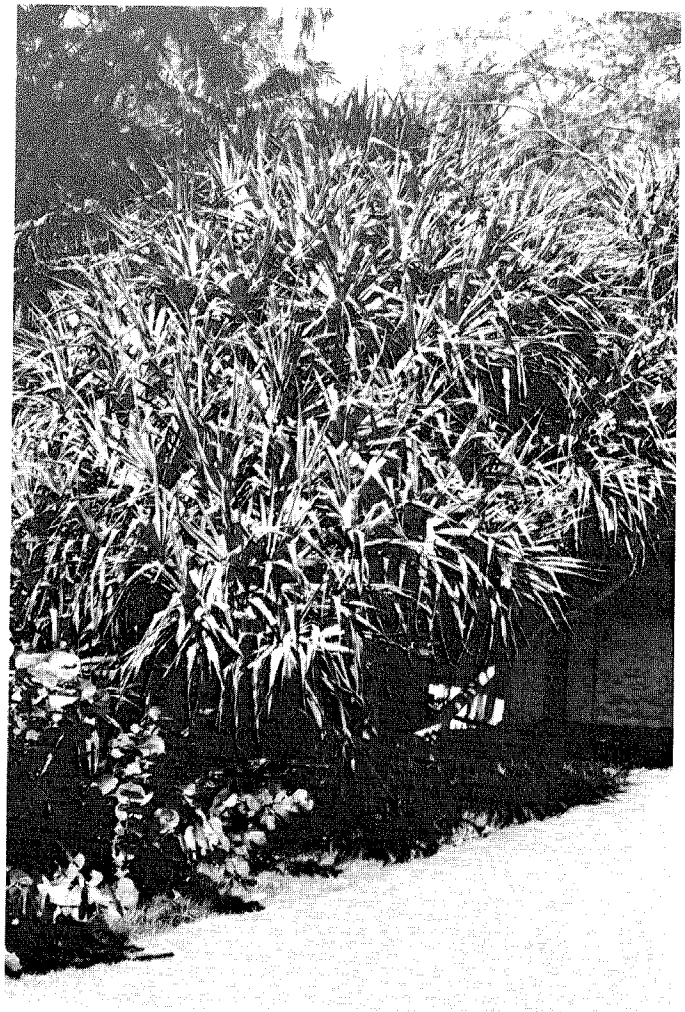
You should have no trouble finding leaves, for accessible hala trees may be found all over the islands—along roadsides, in parks, near homes. Perhaps, however, it was Pele's wrath that originally toughened the beach hala, for it is true that lauhala grown near the ocean is more durable and easier to work than inland lauhala. The selection of good leaves is a most important consideration in creating quality products. If it is convenient for you to gather lauhala near the ocean, do so. The sun and sea winds will have cured the leaves, and their preparation will be simpler, their lifetime longer.

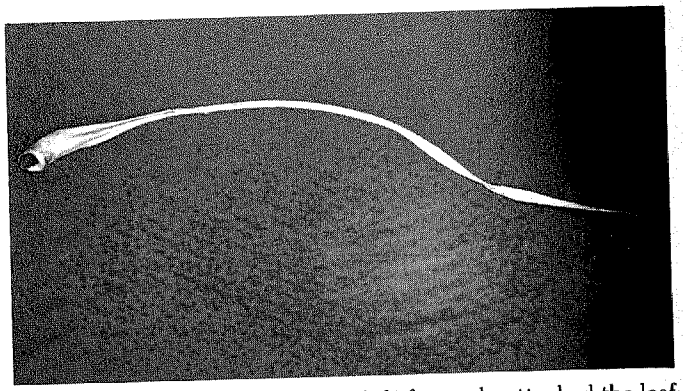
Wherever you collect your lauhala, try to select only from those leaves which have recently fallen to the ground or any dry ones hanging from the tree. Look for long, straight, unbroken leaves. Generally, the older ones are brittle and have lost the pliability necessary for plaiting. It is usually best to pick leaves in the early morning, when they are damp and not easily torn or damaged.

Except at higher elevations, hala trees can be seen almost anywhere

. . . near beaches *(above left)*
. . . as specimen trees in landscaped gardens *(left)*
. . . in almost every park on Oahu *(page 15, left)*
. . . as ornamental trees in private yards *(page 15, right)*



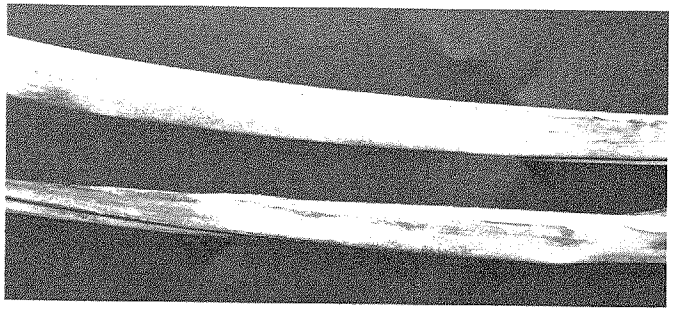




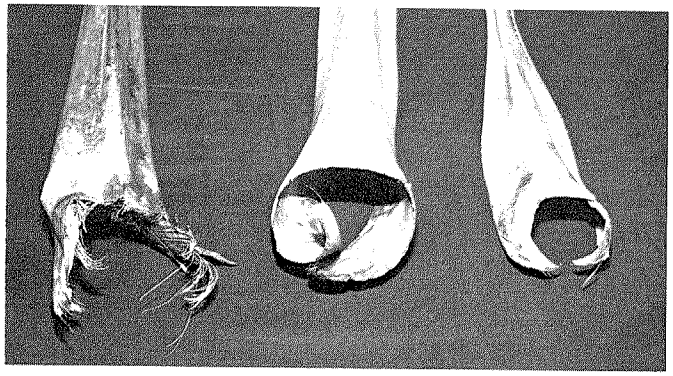
A typical hala leaf. The base end *(left)* formerly attached the leaf to the tree; the upper side *(right)*, which faces the sun, is shiny; the tip is shown at the extreme right; a hard midrib extends along the center of the entire length of the leaf.

Top left: Here several brown leaves are hanging loosely from the trees, beneath the green leaves. Some of these brown leaves may be good for stripping.

Left: Check the ground for useable leaves. Often newly fallen leaves are of good quality.



Close-up of the thorns along the midrib and leaf edges.



One way to determine the general strength and pliability of the leaves is to examine the base ends. The base end on the left is frayed and ragged; this leaf should be discarded. The other two are intact, and the leaves are probably of good quality.

Left: A row of very sharp thorns grows along each edge of the leaf and along the midrib on the underside.

If time is not important, green leaves may be cut from the tree, dethorned, flattened, and dried for use. Those left out in the sun will bleach; those dried inside will remain dark. The drying will take about two weeks. Some lauhala workers boil the partially dried green leaves to bleach them. However, this may weaken the natural strength of the lauhala. "More better to pick the ones kissed by the sun," one weaver told us—the *malo'o*, the naturally dried leaves.

To avoid excessive damage to the useful portion of the leaf, always carry or drag lauhala by the tip. This method of carrying the leaves will also protect your hands from the sharp thorns. When you have gathered about thirty or forty leaves, tie the bunch up high near the tips with the tip of one leaf. This won't damage the leaves because the ends must be trimmed during preparation.

There was recently introduced to the islands a type of thornless pandanus. These trees are still fairly rare here, but if you can find one you won't have to bother with dethorning.

Leaves stored in moist areas (for example, upper Manoa Valley) are easier to work with because the moisture keeps them pliable. One well-known worker keeps her lauhala in a refrigerator which is used for that purpose only.

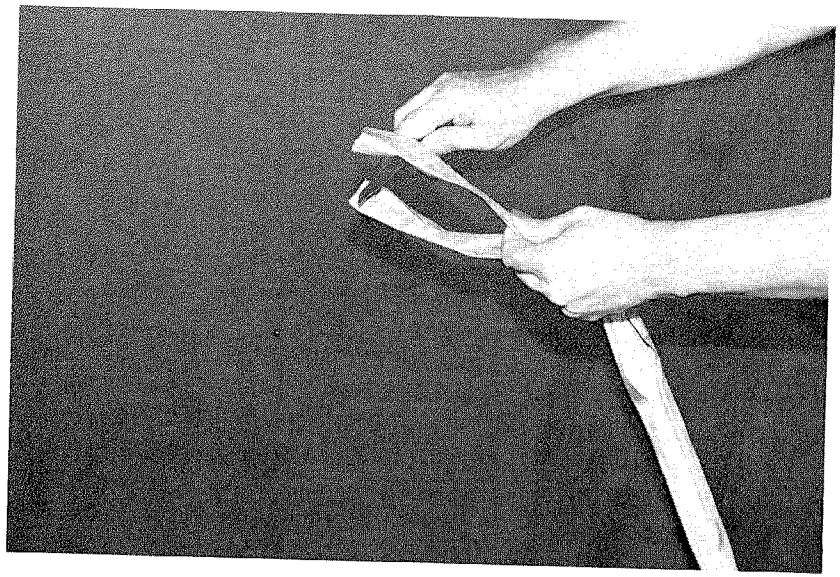
A weaver holding a bunch of tied lauhala.

Preparing the Hala Leaves

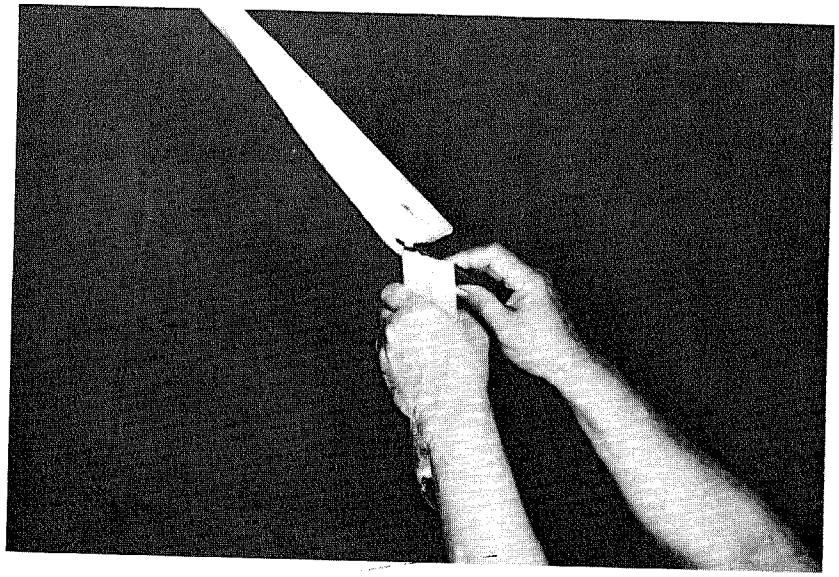
All lauhala is prepared in the same way, no matter which article is to be made. If the leaves you have gathered are very dirty, wash them by dunking them in the ocean, a stream, or your sink, and rubbing away the dirt. Do not use soap.

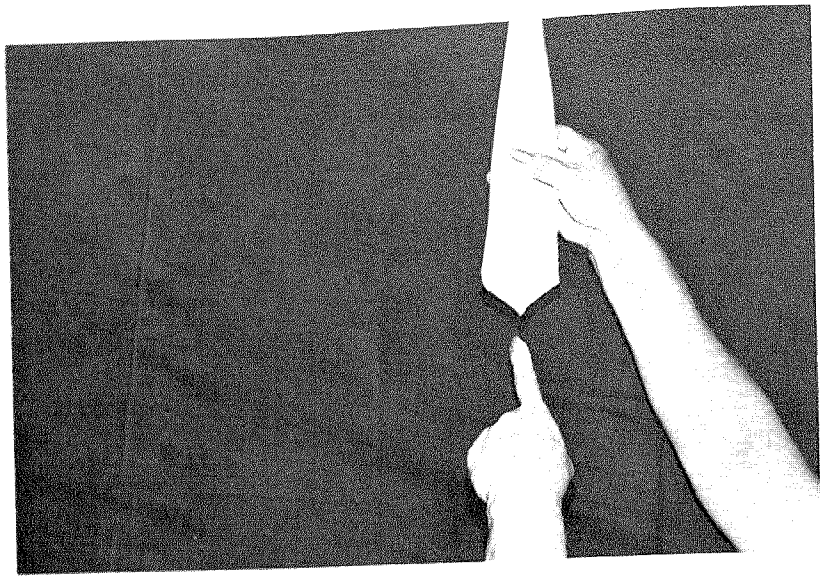
If you have any trouble identifying the terms used in the directions, consult the appendix on p. 151.

Step 1. Cut the tip from the lauhala.

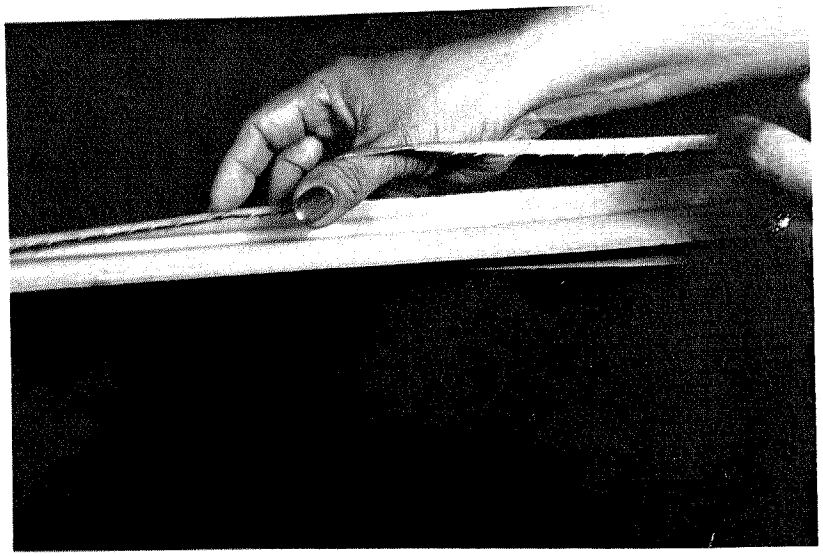


Step 2. Cut the base end. Usually about 4 to 6 inches should be cut from each end, but this will vary according to the condition of the leaf and the density of the base end.



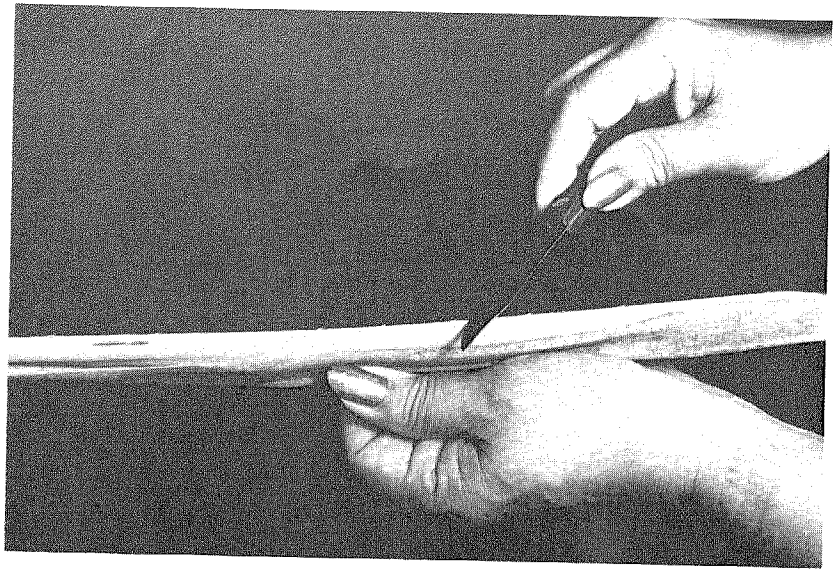


Step 3. When you cut the base, angle the cuts so that the end is a little pointed. (See Step 4 of the *kūka'a* preparation, p. 29.)

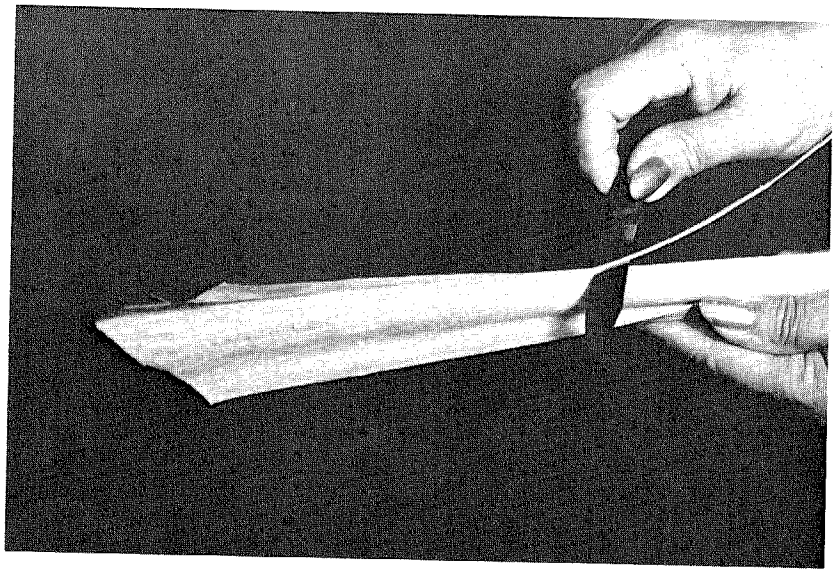


Step 4. Remove the thorns from the edges of the leaf. Insert your thumbnail, a knife, or pin near the base end of the leaf and strip upward toward the tip. Stay close to the edge of the leaf, removing only the thorns and as little of the useable leaf as possible. Be sure to move your hand in the direction the thorns are pointed to avoid injury.

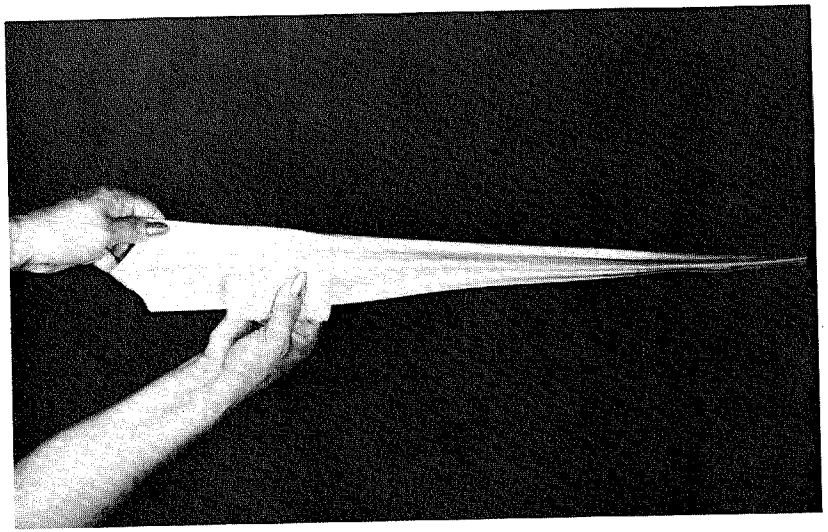
Step 5. Dethorn the midrib by turning up the underside of the leaf with the base end near you, and scraping off the thorns with a knife. Keeping the knife edge turned away from you, scrape upwards the full length of the leaf. Before they had knives, Hawaiians did their dethorning, called *ko'i*, with the sharp edges of sea shells.



Step 6. On some leaves the midrib is so thick near the base end that you will have to split the midrib to make the lauhala uniformly pliable. Lay the leaf on a flat surface with the base end pointed away from you. Cut into the midrib where it begins to thicken and split it upward away from the lauhala, being careful not to cut or damage the leaf on either side. Repeat the process until the midrib is shaved thin enough to be flexible.

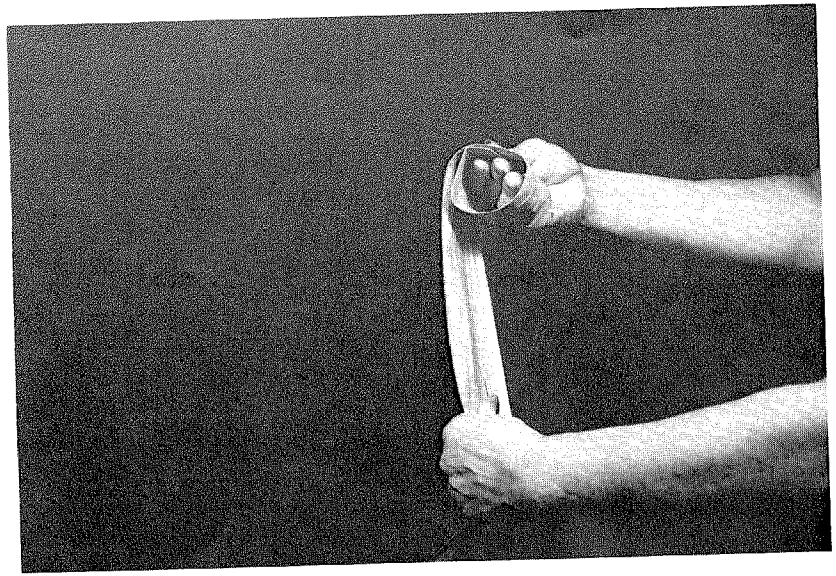


Step 7. Place the leaf in a basin of water to clean and soften it.

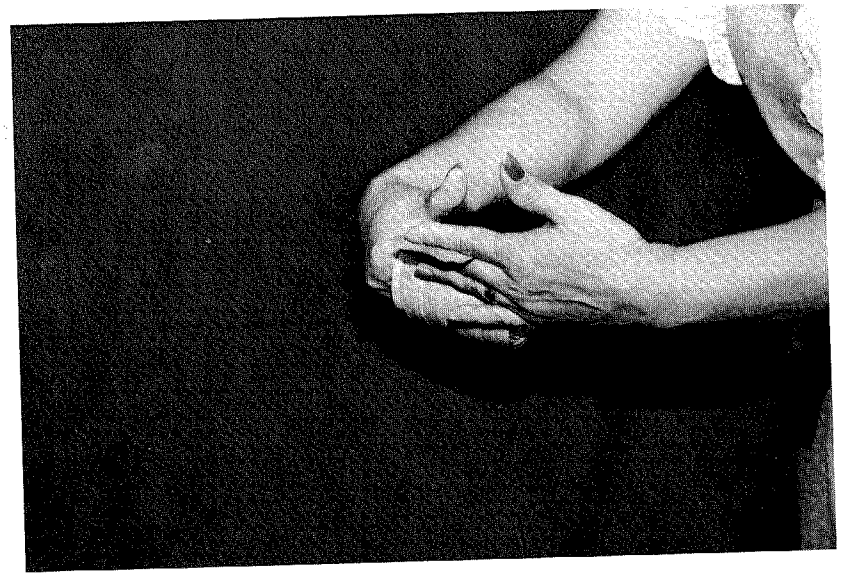


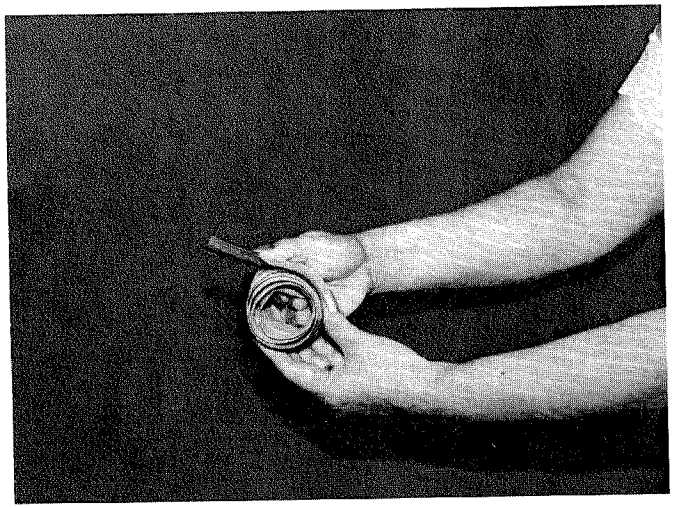
Step 8. Continue softening *(ho'opulu)* the leaf by rubbing a damp cloth over it. The moisture in the cloth will penetrate the leaf and it will become less stiff and will begin to flatten. This process also helps to remove any remaining dirt from the leaf.

Step 9. For the flattening process, begin with the underside of the leaf facing up. Clasp the base end in one hand and roll the leaf around this hand until you have a fairly tight coil. Straighten the edges of the leaf as you roll it. The Hawaiians called this method of flattening *po'ala* (which means to coil or wind) because of the way the leaf is coiled around the hand.

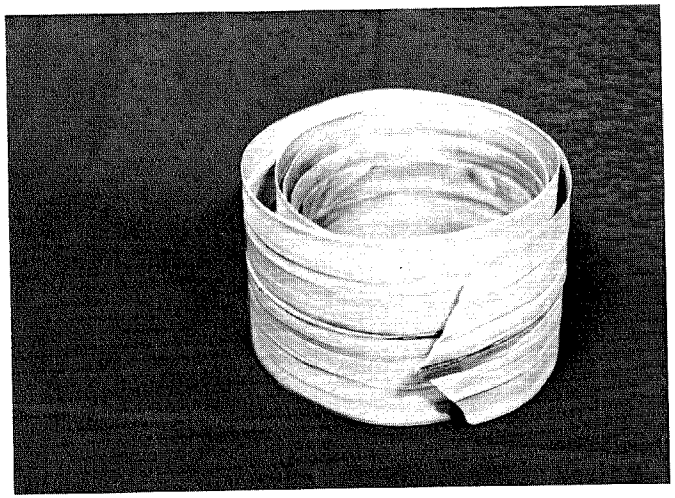


Step 10. When you reach the tip, clasp it between the forefinger and middle finger of the other hand and reverse the process, wrapping the leaf around this other hand until the base end is reached. Rolling the leaf forward and backward several times will cause it to remain flat and pliable.





Step 11. The leaf should be worked until it is flexible enough that it can curl fairly tightly around your fingers.

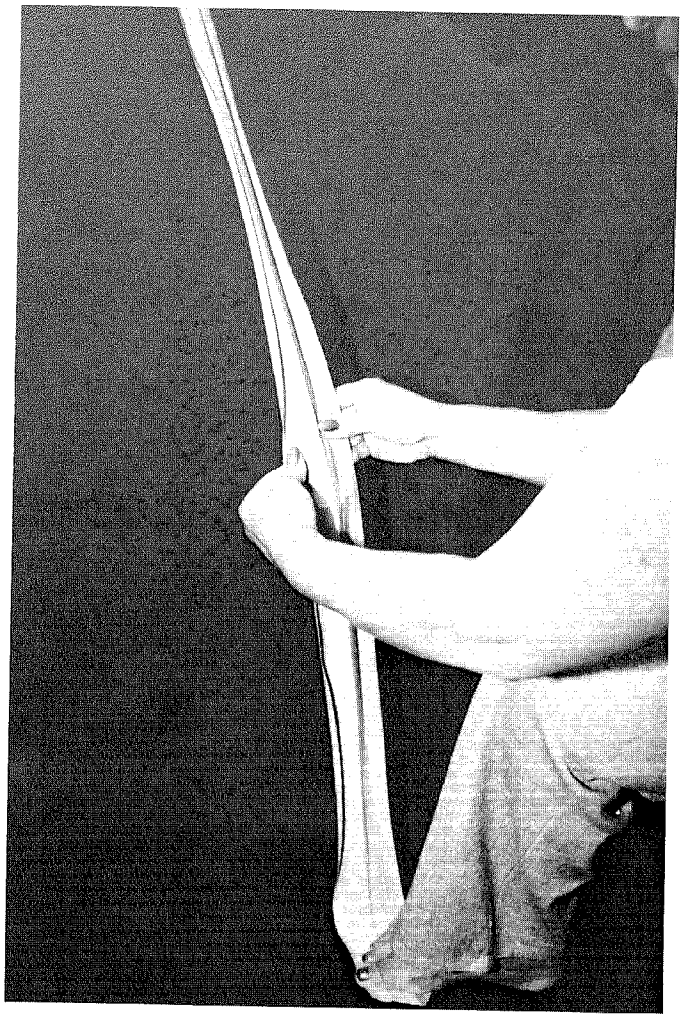


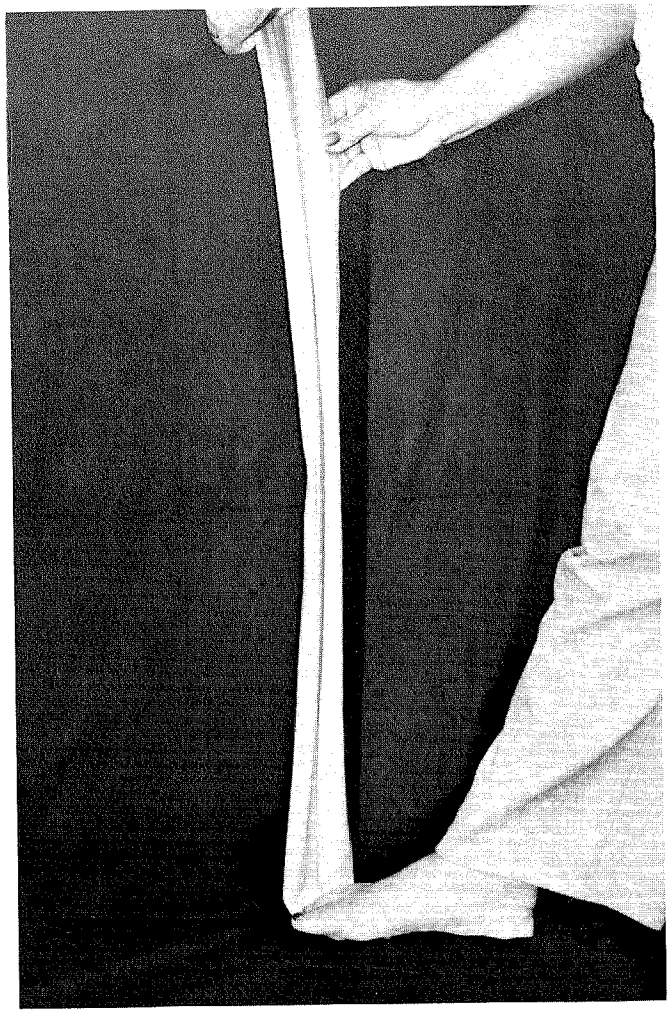
You now have a cleaned and prepared hala leaf, ready to be stored, or stripped for use.

There are many ways of softening and flattening lauhala. Stones, iron rollers, or shells can be rolled over them. The ancient Hawaiians sometimes used wooden clubs to soften them. You can also pull against the edges with a dull knife, or wring the leaf through an old washing machine's wringer or a pasta machine.

For very long leaves, a method of softening and flattening called *ho'opalupalu* is used. These long leaves, sometimes more than 8 feet in length, are preferred because a minimum of splicing new leaves into the weave is required.

After the long leaf has been trimmed and debarbed, the flattening and softening process is begun. The base is held underfoot, and the leaf is pulled and massaged upward.





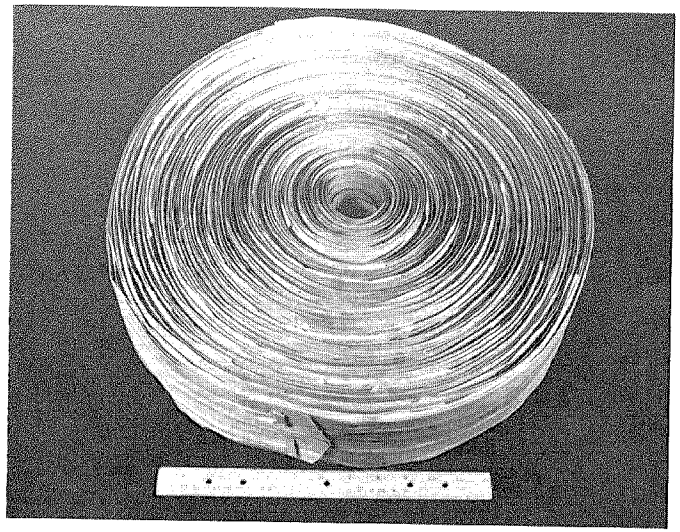
Several long, flattened leaves.

The worker rises slowly to a standing position, flattening the leaf edges as she rises.

Making a *Kūka'a*

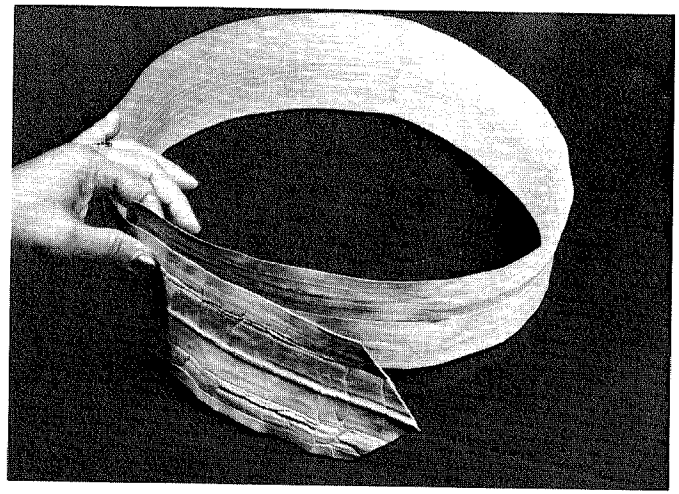
The Hawaiians store prepared lauhala in circular rolls that contain from fifty to one hundred leaves. These rolls of lauhala, called *kūka'a*, are easy to carry or stack. Another advantage of the kūka'a is that it forces the leaves to stay flat and makes them easier to work.

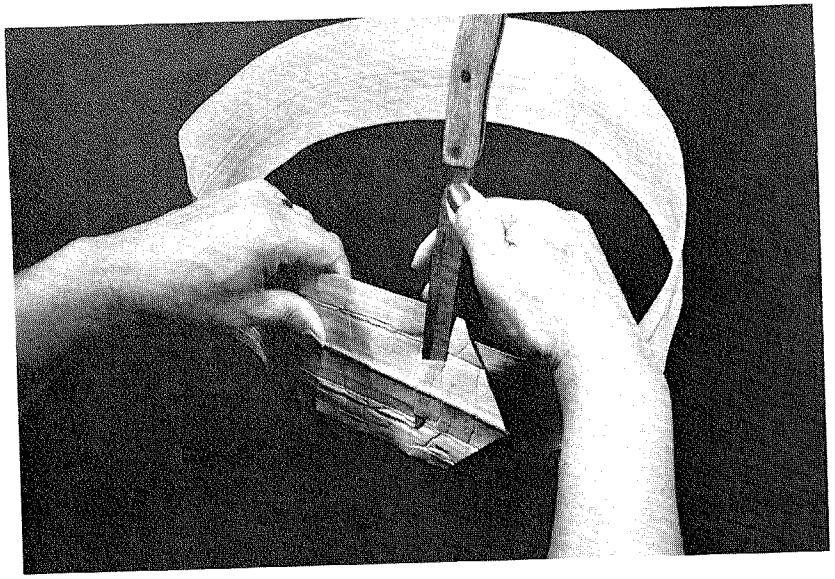
The early Hawaiians sold or bartered their kūka'a; even today kūka'a of high quality lauhala are shipped to Oahu from the neighbor islands and sold to local weavers.



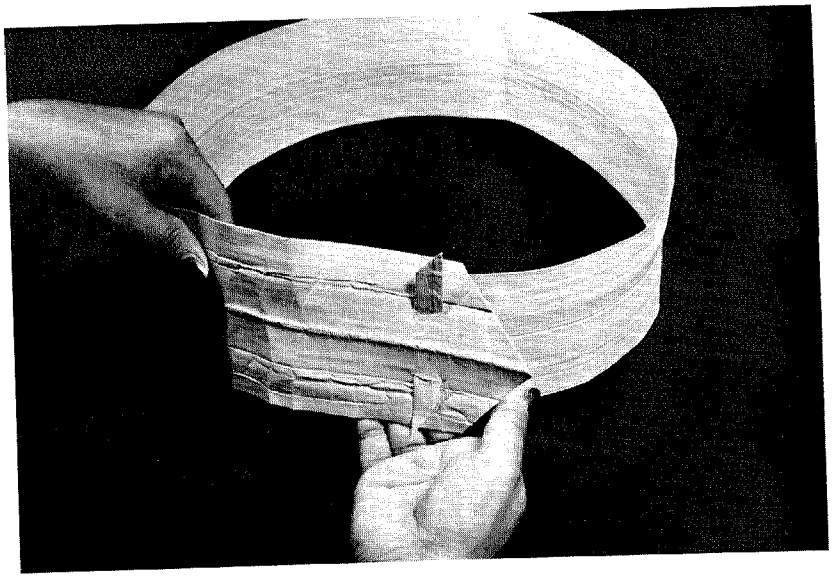
A *kūka'a*.

Step 1. Begin your kūka'a by selecting a long, sturdy hala leaf. Form a circle with the leaf, overlapping the ends as much as you want, depending on how large your kūka'a will be. Weavers often put the shiny side of the outer leaf facing out so that the kūka'a will be more attractive.





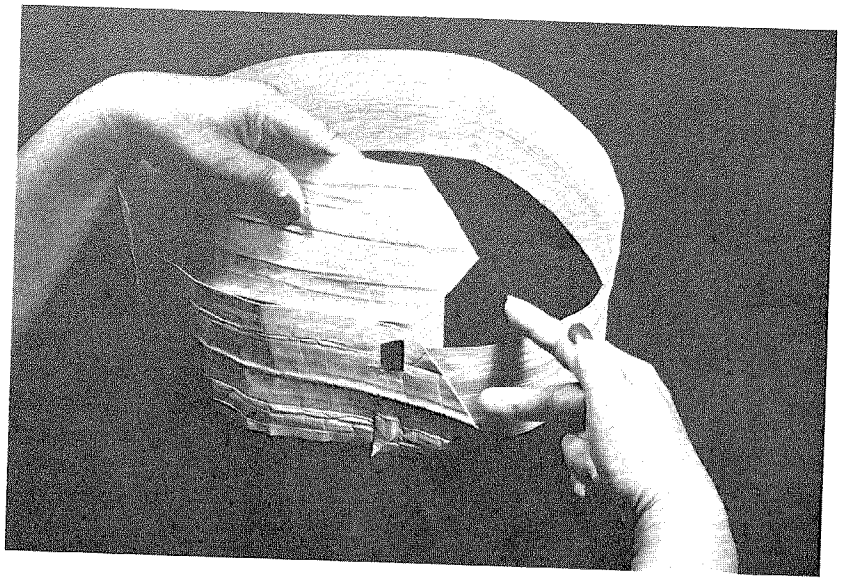
Step 2. With a knife make two small cuts straight through both ends of the leaf, one cut on each side of the midrib.



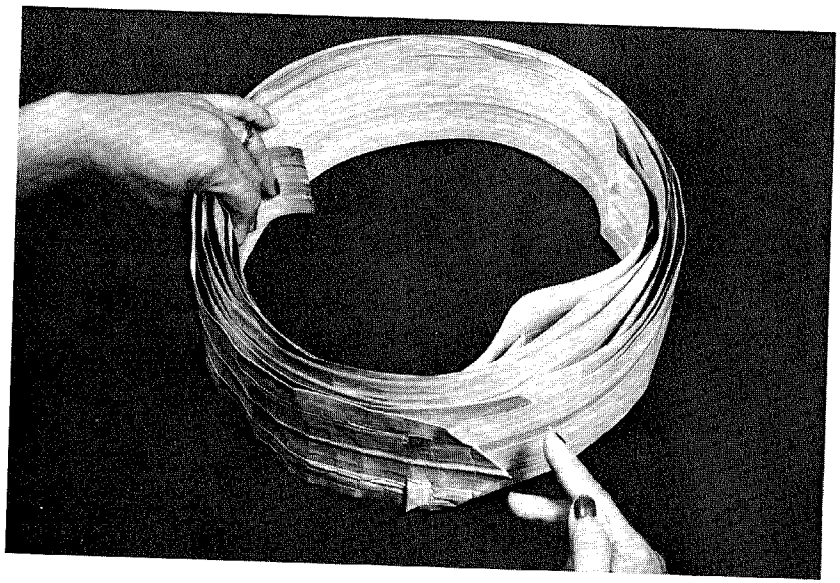
Step 3. Run a thin strip (any scrap strip will do) through the holes. A short, stiff strip won't need to be tied, a longer one will.

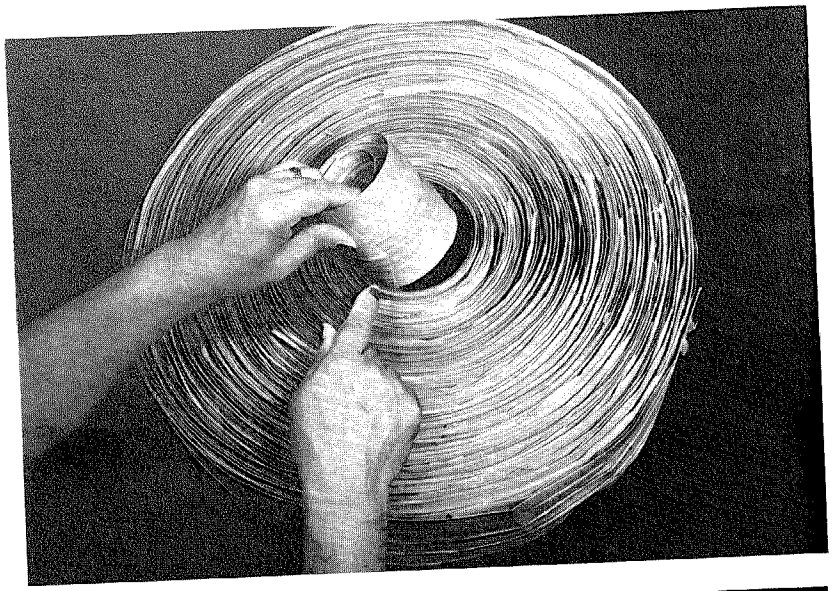
There are several methods for securing the outer leaf of the kūka'a, but this one of cutting the leaf and threading an anchoring strip is perhaps the easiest.

Step 4. Roll the inner leaves against the secured outer leaf. All the base ends (already cut at angles) should point in the same direction. You may insert several leaves at a time until you get near the center.

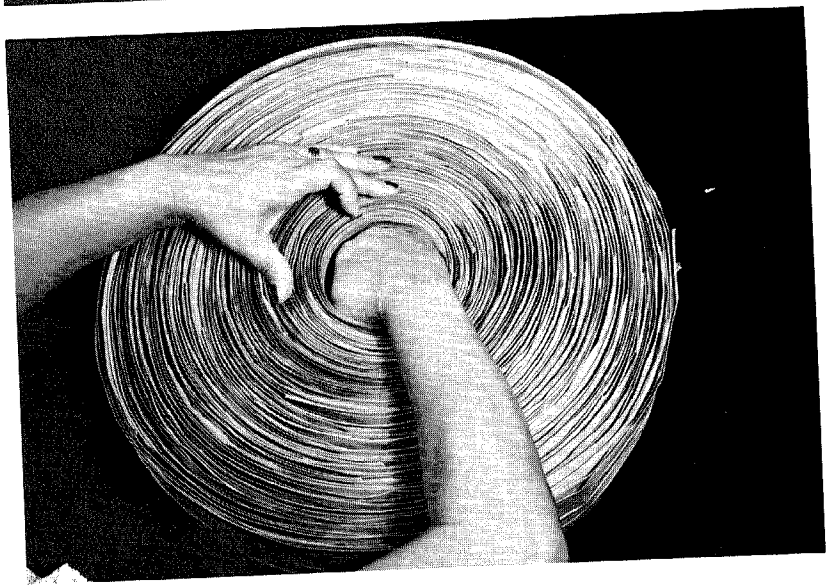


Step 5. As the kūka'a builds, swirl the leaves outward to tighten them against the outer leaf, turning them always in the same direction—toward the pointed base ends. Make the leaves tight, but be sure not to exert too much pressure on the outer leaf, or the cuts you made earlier in the outermost leaf will tear.



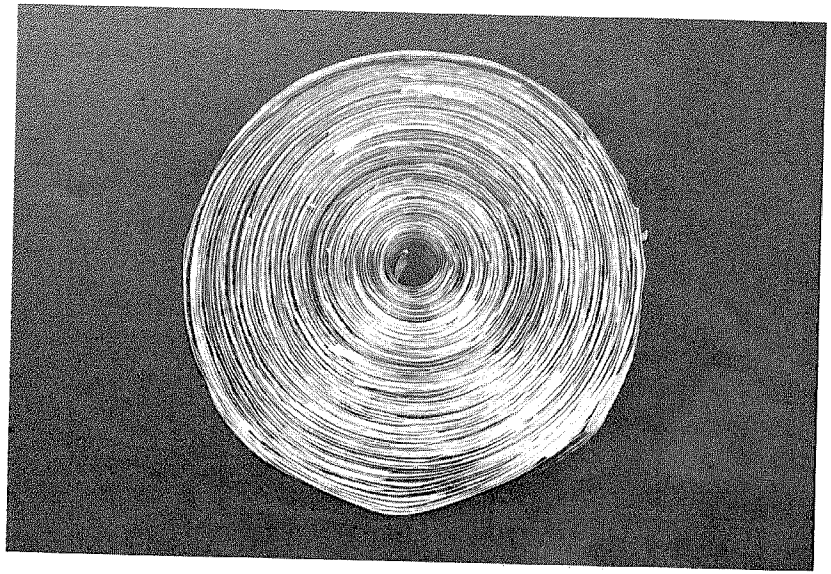


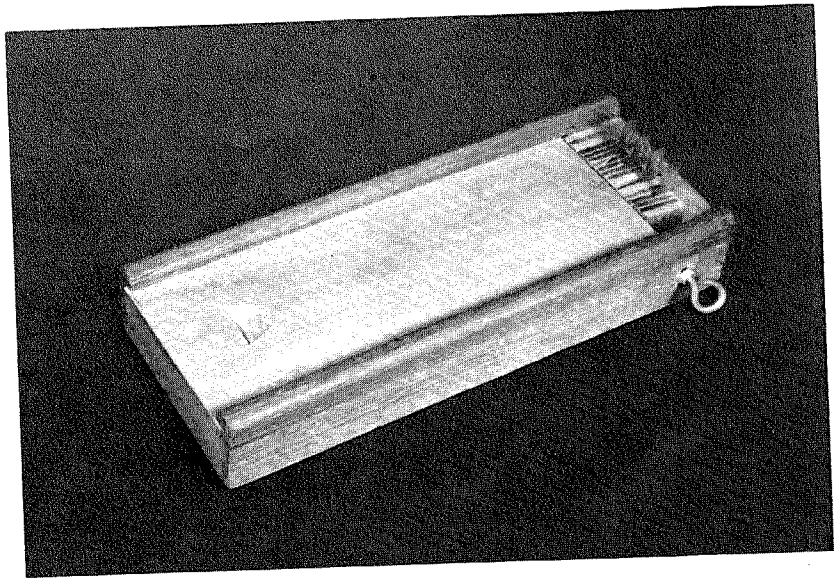
Step 6. When the kūka'a is nearly full, the leaves should be rolled individually and inserted into the center.

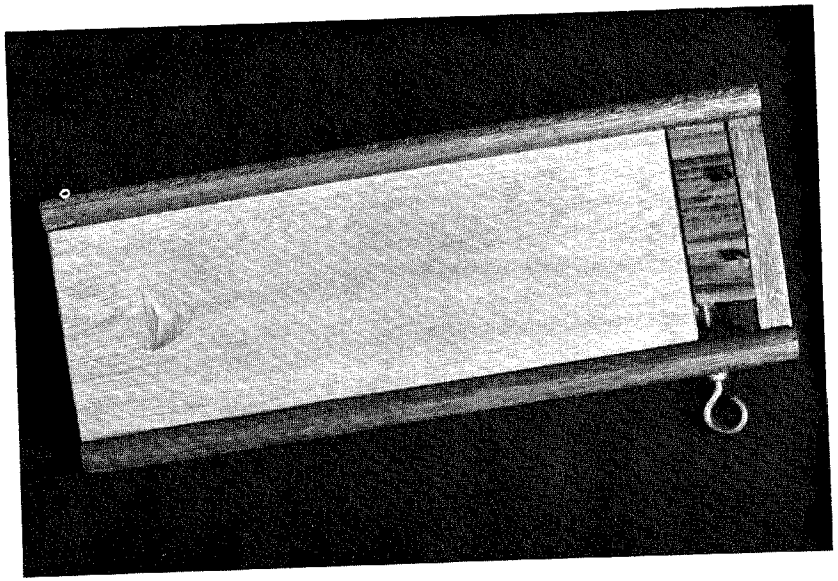


Step 7. Put your fist in the center and turn it, swirling the leaf to fit snugly against the last leaf you put in.

The kūka'a is complete when there is no more room to insert rolled leaves. You may want to run a long strip of lauhala through the center hole (opening) of the kūka'a, and tie it together on the outer rim to keep the whole roll secure. But if the kūka'a is well made it should be tight enough not to fall apart. In the old days, weavers used to roll their kūka'a against a wall to see whose would fall apart first. The loser was pronounced stingy *(pī)* for not packing the roll with enough leaves to make it tight.







Stripping

Cutting lauhala to the proper width is the final step in preparing the leaf for use. Leaves may be left their full width or stripped down almost as narrow as a thread. Most of the items described in this book are made of strips ⅛ to ¾ of an inch wide, but you may later want to create items with other strip widths.

For stripping their lauhala, the ancient Hawaiians used long fingernails, spears of bamboo, bones, shells, large thorns, or anything else sharp enough to pierce the leaves. A single strip was called a *koana*. Later, steel pins or small knives brought by foreigners were used. It was not unusual to see an experienced worker strip leaf after leaf to exactly the same width, using only a single steel pin to complete the process.

Today box strippers make the stripping process easy and accurate. These strippers can be purchased through various lauhala instructors in the islands, or they can be made (dimensions are given on pp. 33 and 34).

The box stripper pictured here was made by Harry Kanekoa, a retired carpenter who will make strippers to order. If you would like to order one from Mr. Kanekoa, write to him at 2737-E Booth Road, Honolulu, HI, 96813.

The dimensions of this box stripper are 10¼ × 4 × 1½ inches. It has a top that slides into place. At the end of the box are notched masonite blocks, ⅛-inch-wide, held in place by the top of the box and a large hooked screw. Between these blocks razor blades are inserted. Inside the box extra blades, blocks, and lauhala scraps are stored.

Prepare the stripper by arranging the razor blades between the masonite blocks according to the size of the

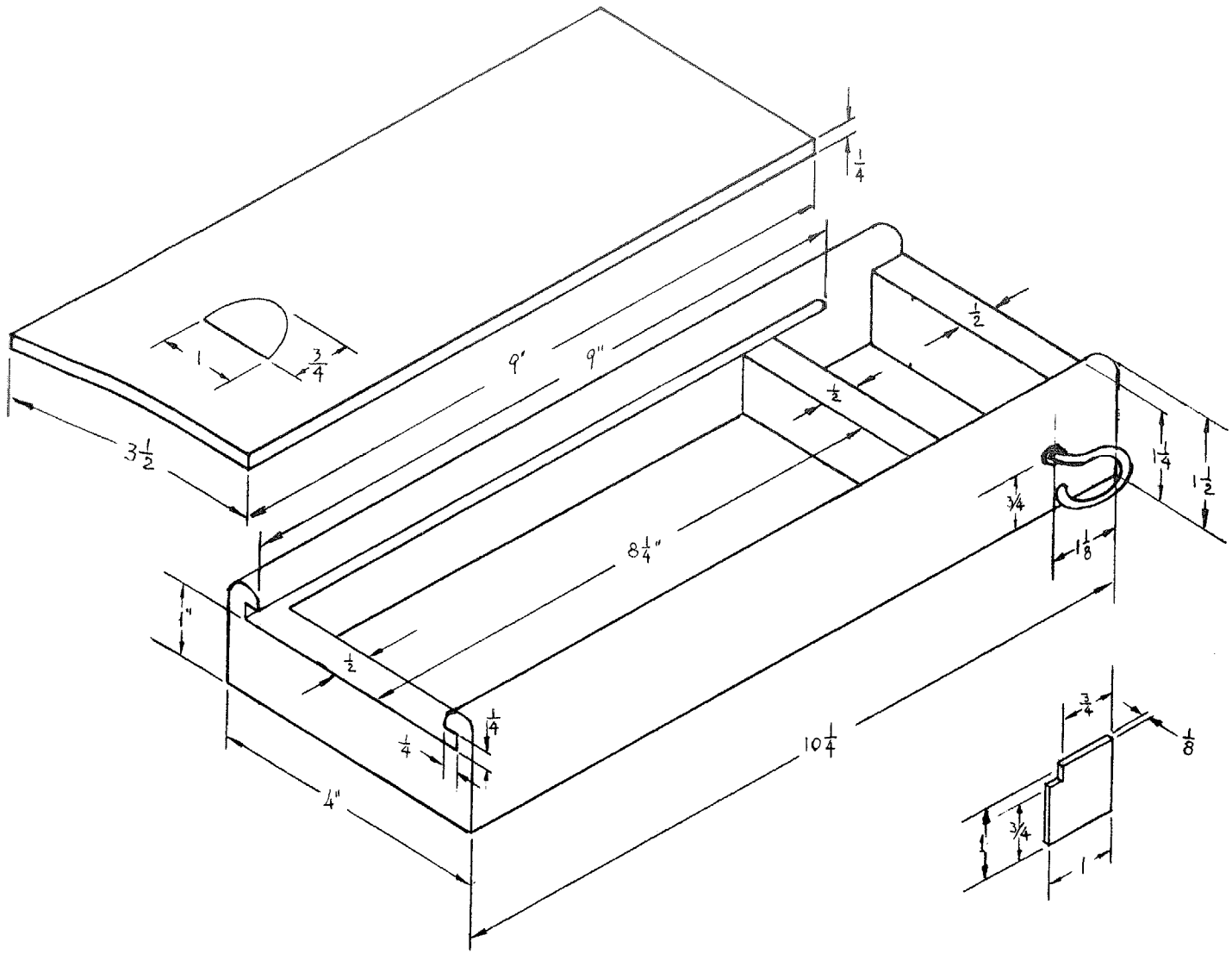
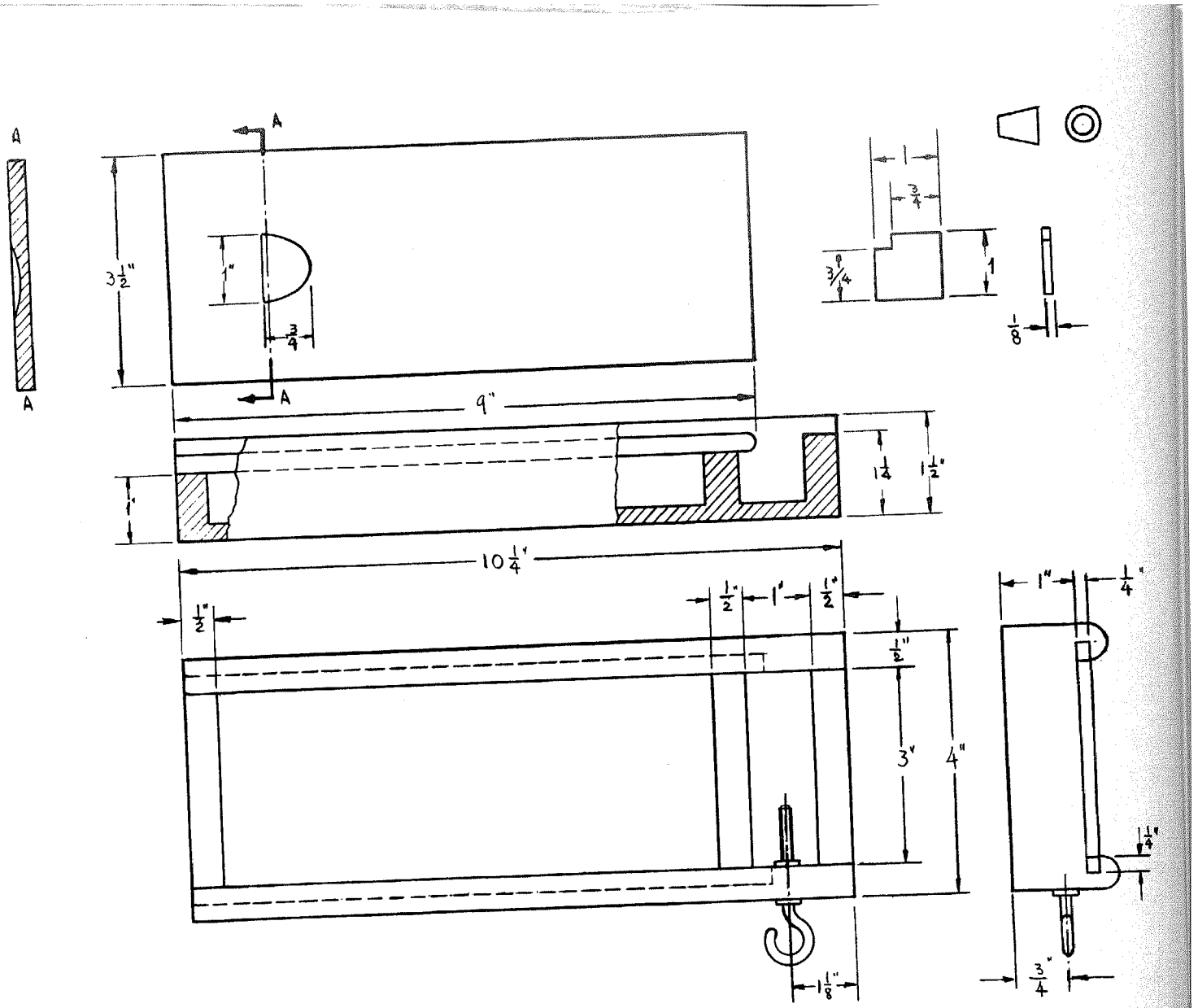


Diagram of a box stripper, with dimensions.


A
A
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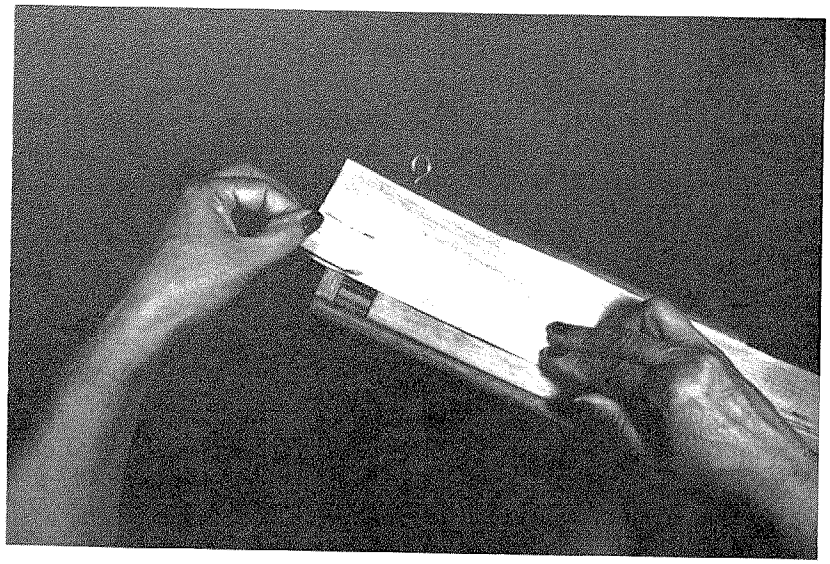
1"
½
½"
3"
4"
1"
¼
1¼"
1⅛"
¾"

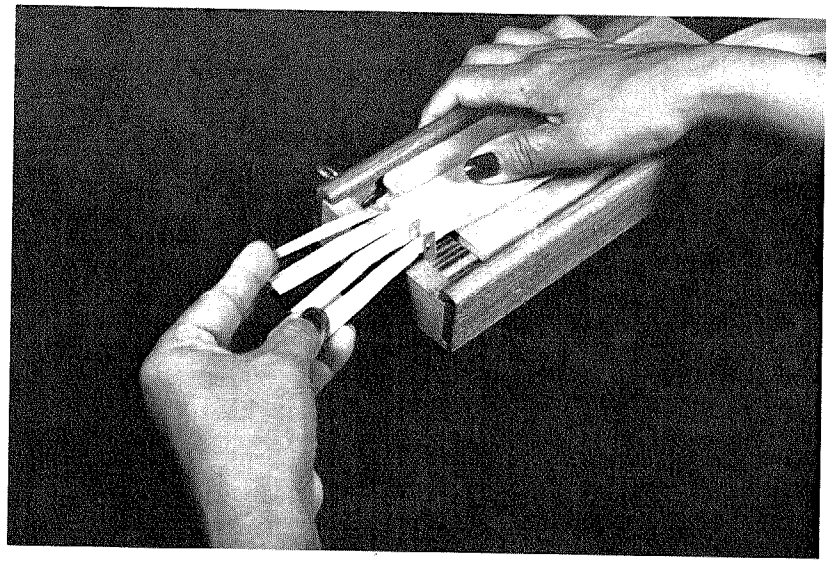
strips you want. Angle the blades slightly against the side, positioned so that the cutting edge can cut through the leaf easily.

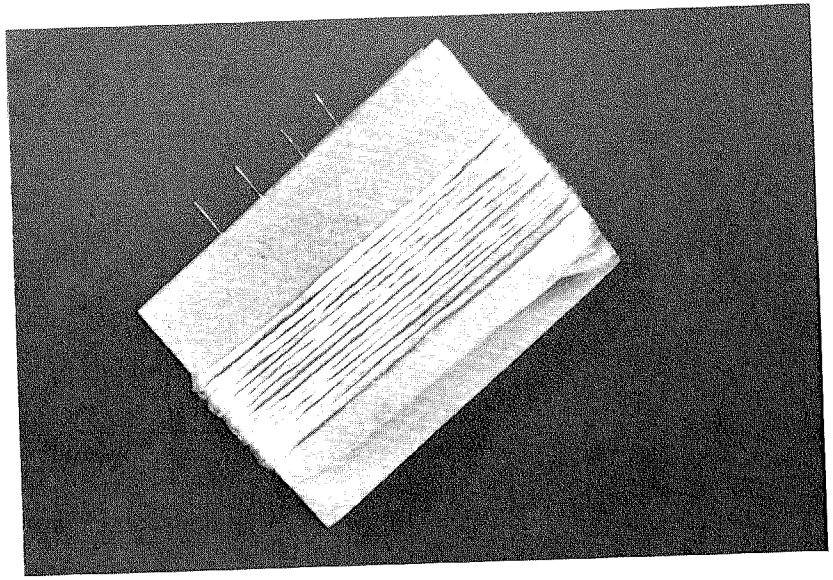
Re-soften the leaf if necessary to make it pliable enough to pull along the stripper. Place the leaf flat on the box top with the heavy base end facing the blades. Pull the leaf through the cutting edges, keeping one blade parallel with and close to the midrib. This will help you guide the leaf through straight.



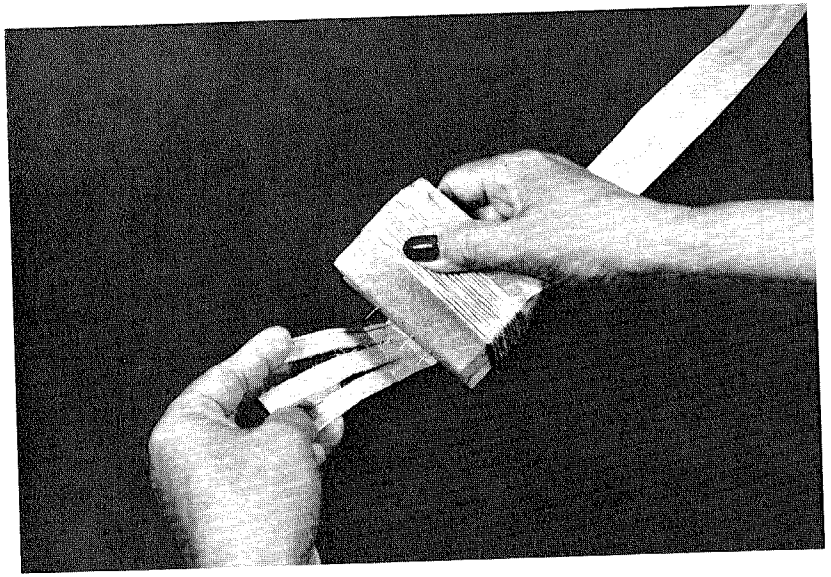
Cut only two or three strips at a time. Pull the leaf along steadily its whole length.

A box stripper is not essential, however. Some workers use needles as described and illustrated below.





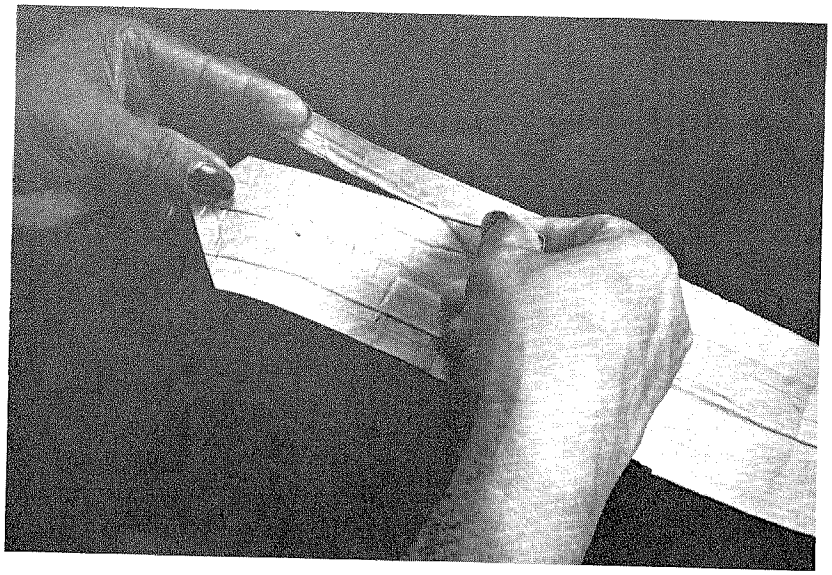
Hand-held needle stripper: Make this stripper with two blocks of wood that fit into your hand. Scratch grooves into the edge of one of the blocks at desired intervals, then glue the needles in the grooves, with the points protruding at least ¼ inch above the block. Clamp the second block to the first by wrapping the two together firmly with twine. This will secure the needles. Additional glue may be used between the blocks and over the twine.

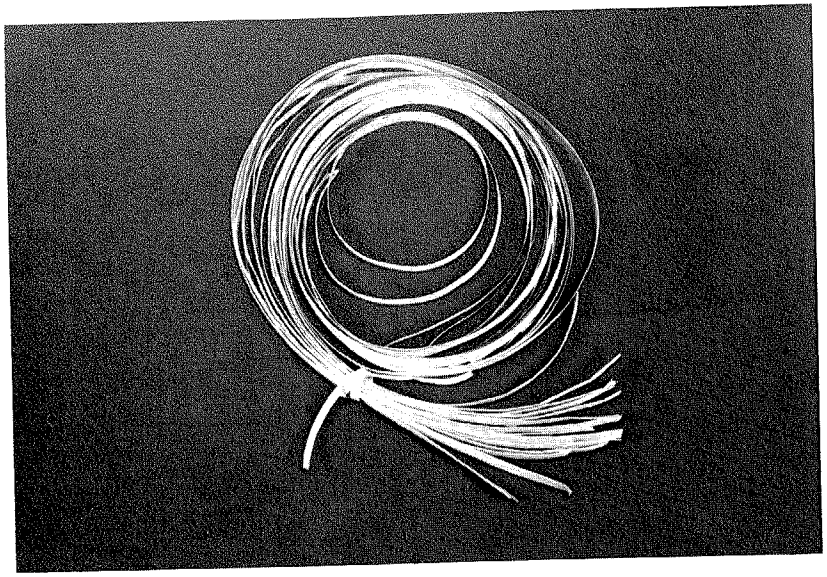


To strip the lauhala, simply rake the hand-held stripper over the top of the leaf, beginning at the base. A towel beneath the leaf will cushion the needles.

You may also strip lauhala with a single sturdy needle. Again, cushion the needle with a towel, pierce the leaf, and pull the lauhala straight through, using your fingertip to gauge the width of the strip as it separates from the rest of the leaf.

There may be as many different methods of stripping as there are weavers. We have heard of strippers made from filed iron, or even spurs, nailed to boards. Some weavers have stripped with loose razor blades, toothpicks, pocket knives, and fingernail files. Some have converted old work tables or thick wooden blocks into strippers by taping needles to the end of the table and clamping the needles firm by nailing a piece of wood against the table edge. The leaves are stripped by pulling them across the tops of the needles.





A bundle of lauhala strips.

Clustered hala trees will produce uniform leaves.

The qualities of the leaves—their texture, length, pliability, thickness, and color—will differ. You will want to use strips that are similar for one project; so tie the common strips in loose bundles to keep them separated from other strips that may be cut in the same stripping operation. Some weavers are so particular about the consistent quality of their strips that they will use only leaves from a single tree to weave an item. But trees growing close to each other are usually related, and their leaves should be uniform enough to be used together.