

Corn Dollies

The tradition for making corn dollies dates back to ancient times, with different regions adopting their own designs and forms.

Many pagan cultures believed that the 'spirit' of the corn lived in the crop and when each field was harvested the 'spirit' retreated into the last sheaf of corn left standing. In order to secure a good crop the following year, the 'spirit' needed protection over the winter to keep her safe - so the last sheaf was fashioned into a corn dolly that was brought into the farmhouse over the winter and returned to the earth in spring.

Older terms for these trophies were 'kern-baby' (or 'kern' baby), 'maiden', 'ivy girls' or 'mell dolls'. Some cultures made the figure of a woman and others made ornaments or symbols of fertility and plenty such as a cornucopia.

WHICH COLOUR RIBBON WILL YOU CHOOSE FOR YOUR CORN DOLLY?

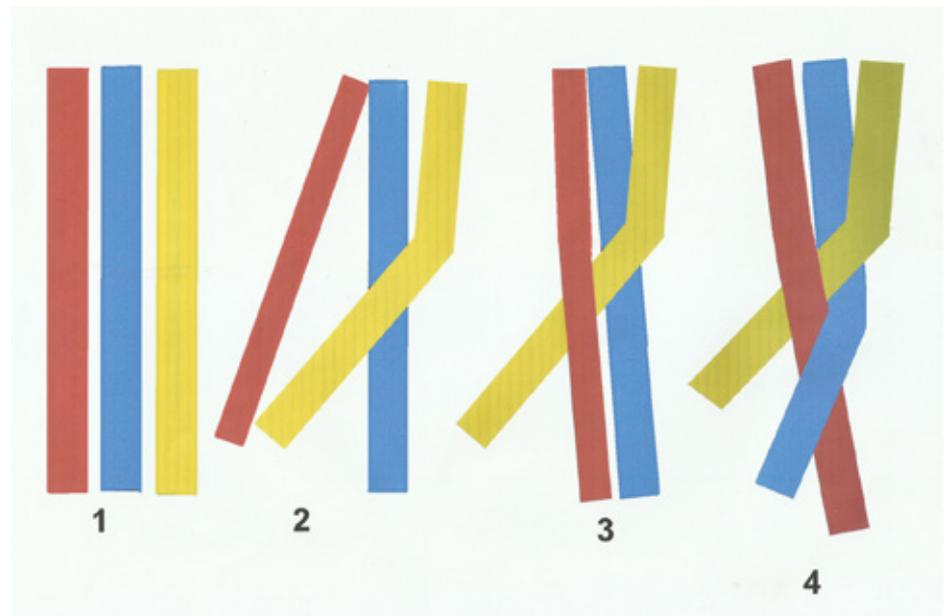
Corn dollies are traditionally embellished with ribbons in different colours, each with their own meaning:

White is for purity
Brown is for the earth
Green is for the newly growing corn
Gold is for the ripened wheat
Orange is for the sun
Red is for warmth and also for the poppy in the cornfield
Blue is the colour of truth and also the colour of the cornflower



HOW TO MAKE A SIMPLE PLAIT OR BRAID

More ornate corn dollies take great skill and much experience but the braiding of a simple plait or gentleman's favour is a good place to start. Perhaps you could practise with grasses when you are out in the countryside and leave behind your ornament for the pleasure of those who pass by after you - no fear of leaving anything harmful as might happen with artificial materials, as your dolly will simply fall apart and biodegrade in a short while and the seed will fall to the ground and grow in the following spring.



1. Prepare your straw or wheat by soaking it in warm water until it is pliable enough to plait. If using grasses or reeds, you may need to combine two or three stems together to make thicker 'strands'.
2. Take three stems and bind them together securely just below the ears using a piece of twine, string (or nettle grass if you are brave enough).
3. Take the stem on the right and fold it over the central stem (yellow over blue in drawing 2).
4. Take the stem on the left and fold it over the new central stem (red over yellow in drawing 3).
5. Take the stem on the right and fold it over the new central stem (blue over red in drawing 4).
6. Continue plaiting until the braid is the length you require.

TIP

To lengthen stems for braiding, cut the ears off a new stem and carefully slide the new stem into the piece that needs lengthening.

VARIATION - A COUNTRYMAN'S FAVOUR

Formed from a simple plait or braid shaped into a loose knot or heart shape, these were traditionally created by young country lads for their sweethearts. If the country maid was seen wearing the favour, the lad would know that his feelings were reciprocated.

METHOD

Create a three-braid plait (right image), making it approx. 20cm in length. Form it into a loop and tie the two ends together with twine just under the ears. Decorate with pretty ribbon, flowers, leaves or dried seed heads, etc. Create a heart-shape if you wish, however it may not retain its shape until it has dried.





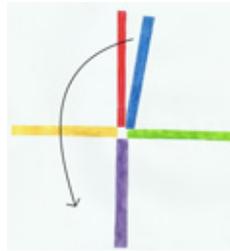
HOW TO MAKE A FIVE STRAW CORN DOLLY

Once you have mastered a simple braid or gentleman's favour, you can progress to a simple five straw corn dolly. The corn dolly in the picture is made with biodegradable drinking straws, which you may wish to use as an alternative to straw or wheat.

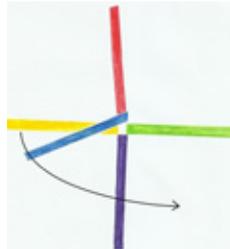
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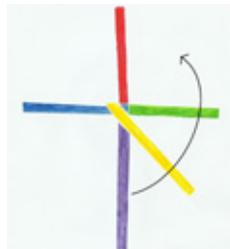
1. Prepare your straw or wheat by soaking it in warm water until it is pliable enough to plait. If using grasses or reeds, you may need to combine two or three stems together to make thicker 'strands'.
2. Take five stems and bind them together securely just below the ears with a piece of string, strong grass (or nettle twine if you are brave enough). Holding the join in one hand, carefully open out the five stems to form compass points with two stems pointing 'North'.



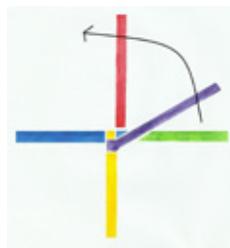
3. Take the right hand stem at 'North' (the weaver stem) and take it across to the opposite side so that it sits at 'South-West' (blue over red then yellow).



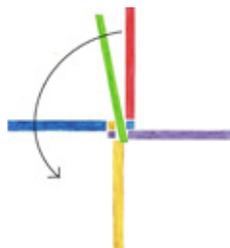
4. Take the stem that has just been crossed over (which now becomes the weaver stem) and bend it over the original 'weaver' and then over the 'South' stem (yellow over blue then purple).



5. Take the stem that has just been crossed over (the new weaver stem) and bend it over the previous 'weaver' and then over the 'East' stem (purple over yellow then green).



6. Take the stem that has just been crossed over (the new weaver stem) and bend it over the previous 'weaver' and then over the 'North' stem (green over purple then red).



7. Repeat the steps, crossing the weaver stem over two stems each time. You will notice that a 'core' is being shaped where the bends sit next to each other. Gently ease them together to tighten if you want an even braid.

8. To make a shaped dolly such as a 'bell' or a 'lantern', simply increase the size by making each bend just outside the previous one. To decrease the size, make each bend just inside the previous one.
9. To finish an even braid or 'lantern', simply tie off the ends with twine or string. If you are making a bell, tuck the ends securely inside. To finish, decorate with a pretty ribbon, flowers, leaves or dried seed heads, etc.