A step-by-step guide for the do-it-yourself enthusiast

This is the first of a series of four articles by R. BARRAUD, based on a similar series first published in Trout and Salmon some years ago. The articles have been revised and brought up to date by the author and are reprinted because of the many requests we have had for them from readers.

LETTERS and queries show that there is a surprising number of enthusiasts who like to make their own rods — and split-cane ones at that. So here, step by step, is a way of building a split-cane rod. This has been arrived at only after selection or rejection in actual practice of all the known methods and materials available to the amateur, though there will still remain difficulties and problems that can only be solved by the craftsman's adaptiveness and instinct.

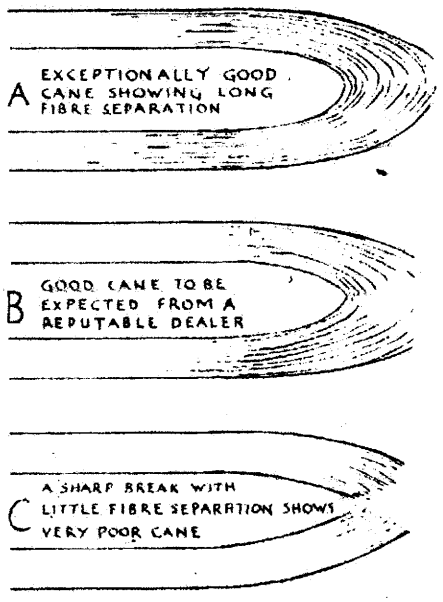
Incidentally, I am not going to suggest that the amateur should try to bake or kiln-dry his cane. This is often done by professionals to make the cane harder and more steely in action. But it is very difficult to carry out if you do not have the full and expensive equipment and, as far as the average amateur is concerned, trying to bake the cane might do more harm than good.

A good long period in a really warm and dry airing cupboard will reduce the moisture content quite adequately and far more uniformly than any hit-or-miss attempt at home baking.

Rod cane is *Arundinaria amabilis*, which is the Tonkin Cane or Tea Stick Bamboo of commerce and is only known in cultivation from a tiny area of South China on the borders of Kwantung and Kwangsi provinces, and the best has always been bespoken by high-class rodmakers. It is becoming more and more difficult to obtain because of the international situation.

That sold to amateurs is described as "best female Tonkin cane" and in a shipment there may be as many as five species from which your supplier selects the best and most suitable. One therefore has to trust one's supplier and, for that reason, one with a long and good reputation for rod-making materials should be chosen; on no account buy "garden" canes. And make sure the whole cane has not started to split anywhere along its length, however much you are assured it does not matter. Get the largest diameter cane you can, whatever size of rod you intend to make, and, of course, the straightest. Some suppliers list just canes and "selected" canes at a small extra charge; it is well worth the extra for the selected ones.

The first thing to do is to make a saw cut through one wall only and right along the cane. Make sure the cut is straight from one end to the other. Then store in the airing cupboard for at least three weeks (the longer the better) before proceeding further. Store upright or flat but do not lean at an angle against a wall or the canes might take on a bend.



CHARACTERISTIC CANE FRACTURES

Gloves: For all further operations when handling canes wear leather or tough canvas gloves. If you find it difficult to use a tool, at least wear a glove on the other hand and handle the cane only with that hand. The edges of worked or roughly-split cane can cut flesh to ribbons in no time at all.

Nodes: These are the projecting annular ridges or joints along the cane from which the leaves spring. They must be removed and the best time to do this is when the cane is whole. Use a wide, fine file and carefully file the nodes all round flush with the adjacent cane but do not cut through the "enamel" or outer skin of the main cane.

That is the traditional method used by many of the finest rodmakers and I have never known a rod to break at the node just because it has been removed any more than between the nodes, but some purists like to press the nodes flat instead of filing them off. You can do this after removing the node from the inside of the cane (as described below) by heating a node and about an inch both sides of it over a flame until as hot as possible without scorching the cane. Then immediately squeeze the node flush with adjacent surfaces in a clamp or vice, with pieces of hardwood shaped to the convex and concave surfaces between the cane and jaws of clamp or vice.

Each node must be allowed to get quite cold before release so it is quite a long job to do all the nodes of a rod. Personally, I don't think the time and trouble are worth the theoretical improvement.

Splitting: You can do this with a carving knife but the best tool for the job is a sheath knife because it has a very thick blade, steeply ground, and therefore much more like a wedge than an ordinary knife blade. Place the knife edge across the thick end of the cane in line with the previous saw cut. Start it off with a tap from a hammer, then push and ease it through the whole length of the cane. You may find a little difficulty at each node but a few taps with the hammer will soon drive the knife through them.

The first time you attempt to split a cane you may find the knife has a tendency to wander out of the straight, especially going through a

node. The best way to deal with that is to carry the splitting down to the node and, with the point of another knife, start another split on the other side of the node exactly in line with the main one. You will find that very often after only forcing the knife point in a little way, the node will suddenly split across. Repeat the process, if necessary, at each node. You will now have two halves of cane. Split these again to make four quarters.

You will find the inside parts of the nodes projecting above the concave surfaces of the cane and it is best to remove them at this stage for two reasons; it is easier to do on the wider strips, and their absence makes further splitting both easier and more accurate.

You need not be so careful as you had to be with the nodes on the outside so long as you trim the inner ones off more or less flush with the pithy concave surface — that's all. A sharp gouge of about the same curvature as the cane is the best tool to use but don't dig it in too much or you will lift out useful cane. A sharp tap with a mallet helps, and work from both sides of the node because if you try to cut it off from one side only it is quite likely to bring up a piece of cane with it on the other side.

The only remaining splitting process is to divide the quarters into any number of thinner strips required but always wider than the widest part of the finished triangular section of your would-be rod. But this splitting process is quite different from the first.

Lay one of the quarters, enamel side up, on a table. Start from the thicker end and drive the point of your knife in centrally just in front of the first node from the end, with the edge of the blade facing the node. Tap the knife in if you wish. The node will suddenly split and when it has done so ease the knife forward to extend the split *only half-way to the next node.* Take out the knife and use it on this next node as before, only facing the other way, so that the new split you have formed runs into the first one. Continue all along the cane like that.

Testing: Before going on to shape the cane section it might be worthwhile testing your cane. The test is very rough and ready but it is an indication of cane quality and, at least, will tell you if the material is no good at all for its special purpose and save you wasting further time and trouble. The test means wasting a strip, but better that than working hard only to make a hopeless rod.

All you do is bend a strip round, enamel side out, until it breaks. It is the way it breaks that matters and as a description may not be so clear I have made a rough sketch to help. The better the cane the more the fibres open up at the break and "A" shows a very good rod-making cane indeed. The more likely appearance of the break with the cane normally obtainable will be as "B" and this, too, will make a very good rod. But if the break shows no separating fibres, as "C", you may as well use the cane for holding up plants.

(To be continued next month)