



Yealms, Leggetts & Withies



In this newly thatched Tudor home, note the neat appearance and the unusual sculpting of the thatch around the dormer windows.



Combed wheat, pictured here, is one of three popular thatching materials. The others are long straw and water reed.

Of the building trades still being practiced, roof thatching may be the oldest.

Thatched roofs were seen in the U.S. from the late 1600s well into the 1800s but have since become extremely rare. They are far more common in parts of Europe and Asia. In Great Britain, an estimated 60,000 buildings have thatched roofs, providing work for about 700 thatchers.

Cost is a major reason for the scarcity of thatched roofs in this country. In Great Britain, it typically costs as much as \$10,000 to \$15,000 to install a new thatched roof on a single-family house. Special treatment to meet U.S. fire and building codes can drive the price even higher.

There seems to be a resurgence of interest in thatching, however, and the ancient craft is practiced by at least two U.S. firms. Warwick Cottage Enterprises of Anaheim, California, offers thatching for residential and commercial structures at a price of about \$2,500 per square. Also active in the business is the Dutch Thatched Roofing Co. of Bloomfield, New Jersey, which imports specially grown reeds from Holland.

The thatcher's job is complex, and like so many of the building trades, has its own special vocabulary. Techniques vary, but usually "yealms" (bundles of straw, wheat, or reeds) are tied together with "withies" (often willow branches). The yealms are then pressed into place on the roof with "leggetts" (special tools that look like flatirons). Wooden rods are placed over the thatch and attached to the underlying roof framing.

The pattern of the finished roof affects its ability to shed water. Roof sections exposed to the severest weather generally employ long—over six feet—reeds, so that water can flow with as little disruption as possible.

The roofs are extremely durable, particularly if made from water reeds. They can last 70 years, withstand winds of over 100 mph, resist mildew and fungus, and stand up to heavy rain, snow, and intense heat. According to Wes Warwick of Warwick Cottage Enterprises, roofs thatched by his firm have an R-value of 11.8.

As with shingles, you can reroof by putting new material over the old. As a result, some older homes in Europe have roofs more than three feet thick.

Reed, wheat, and straw aren't likely to assume a major market share of the roofing-materials industry any time soon. But the centuries-old craft of thatching survives, as a romantic and sometimes practical link with the past.



A thatched roof is built up in courses. In this case, bunches of water reeds are held in place by split hazel "sways," which in turn are hooked to the open rafters and covered by subsequent courses.



A thatcher uses leggett to dress the reed into position. Notice the angling of the reed around the skylight.



Because of its steep pitch, the roof on the left is thatched with long straw. The new addition employs water reed. Note the thatcher's trademark, the elaborately decorated cap.