

# MARTHA STEWART Living

*The  
Sweet Side  
of Summer*



HONEY-GLAZED  
BEEHIVE CAKE WITH  
MARZIPAN BEES



# A Touch of the Tropics

*With a few simple stitches, raffia can add summery embellishments throughout the house.*

TEXT BY ELIZABETH HANLY PHOTOGRAPHS BY JONNY VALIANT

**BEACH COLORS** This throw rug's leafy design, made with raffia in three cool-green shades, conjures a vision of palm fronds moving in the breeze. The pair of bedroom slippers is trimmed with bright-yellow raffia fringe. For more project ideas, and for how-tos, see page 92.





REMEMBER THE FEEL of it—that stiff bit of embroidery on your mom’s straw purse? You were a kid, and that thread, raffia, seemed to call up summer vacation and beach-town souvenirs.

Raffia is actually the leaf of *Raphia*, a genus of more than 20 palm trees that includes some of the largest specimens in existence. Native primarily to Africa, the palms—along with knowledge of how to dry and cut the leaves into narrow strips—followed the winds of trade to the South Pacific. Some hula skirts are still made from raffia.

Despite its travels, the frond’s roots remained strong in Africa, where some of the most sublime raffia work was created—woven designs that would ultimately inspire Picasso and his fellow Modernists. In New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, visitors can find the geometric raffia textiles of past African kingdoms.

These days, raffia is enjoying a bit of a fashion moment, appearing on designer handbags from Kate Spade and Christian Dior. But its next creative iteration might be a design of your own. Natural raffia is available at many crafts stores, as is synthetic raffia, which comes in a range of beautifully flashy hues. The threads bring their tropical mood wherever they go. Raffia can deliver unexpected whimsy to a tote bag, a place mat, a throw rug, or a curtain. But it might be most festive at cocktail hour, forming a joyous rainbow of stirrers for a tray of tall drinks.



### raffia window curtain

- ① Using a disappearing-ink fabric pen, draw a wavy vertical line on a curtain, starting directly below the rod pocket.
- ② Stitch over the line (thread and raffia should match), using a sewing machine and a ¼-inch-wide satin stitch.
- ③ Using the disappearing-ink fabric pen, mark the stitched line at 4-inch intervals. Lay 5 strands of raffia (4 inches each) on the first interval. Sew directly over center of strands to create a raffia bow tie. Repeat process, placing raffia strands at each interval and sewing into place.
- ④ Trim raffia if desired. If using synthetic raffia, hold an iron about 5 inches from each bow tie, and press steam button to fluff raffia and give it a fuller appearance.

**KITE RUNNER** A series of small, tufted raffia bow ties, stitched with matching thread onto a sheer curtain, instantly raises a window’s sunniness quotient.

**true or faux?** Natural or synthetic raffia can be used in any of these projects. In addition to offering more color choices, the synthetic variety comes in a continuous length, making it easier to work with; a ribbon of natural raffia is usually a yard long at most. To embroider, thread either kind of raffia onto a needle with a large eye, such as a tapestry, embroidery, or chenille needle.



**BREAKFAST IN PARADISE** Geometric designs can be added easily to place mats. The embroidered pattern and the different colors of raffia offer a nice way to make plain table linens more distinctive.

## raffia place mats

### PREPARATION

① Using a disappearing-ink fabric pen, draw a row of diamond shapes (ours are 1½ by 1½ inches) along the bottom of a place mat. Draw an additional diamond shape at the top left of the place mat.

② Thread a large-eyed needle with raffia in desired color, knotting it before embroidering design using a detached-chain stitch.

### DETACHED-CHAIN STITCH

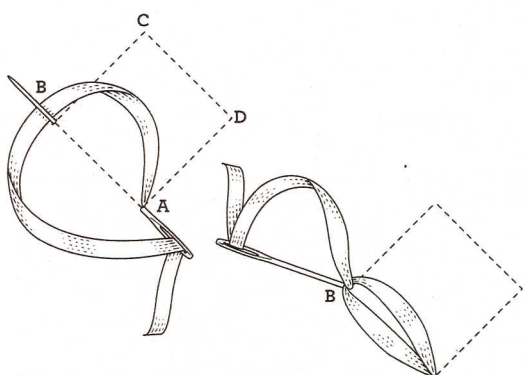
③ Starting with first diamond, draw a threaded needle up through A. Draw the needle down through A, creating a loop. Holding the loop, gently use fingers to flatten and spread out raffia.

④ Draw needle up through B, inside the loop. Pull loop taut. Bring needle down through B, outside of the loop.

⑤ Working on 1 side of diamond at a time, repeat steps 3 and 4, creating a stitch from A to D; C to D; and then C to B.

⑥ Stitch remaining diamonds onto place mats. When stitching several in a row, connect them: Always use point D of the preceding diamond as your new point B.

⑦ Knot stitches on underside of mat as needed. Spot-clean mats as needed.



## raffia slippers

Sew a length of store-bought raffia-fringe trim to a pair of slippers, using thread that's the same color as the raffia.

## raffia throw rug

*Work gently with the raffia to prevent any fraying or breakage.*

### PREPARATION

① Start with a grass mat and raffia in 3 shades. Download templates for the palm fronds from [marthastewart.com/raffia](http://marthastewart.com/raffia).

② Using a disappearing-ink fabric pen, trace templates onto rug where desired; draw a straight line down middle of each leaf. Thread a large-eyed needle with raffia in desired color, knotting it before embroidering design using a fishbone stitch.

### FISHBONE STITCH

The very first stitch (point A to B) should be about 1 inch long, to create the top point of the leaf. Stitches that follow should be about ½ inch apart.

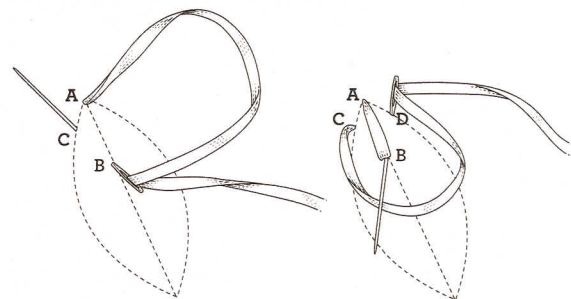
③ Draw needle up through A, then down through B.

④ Draw needle up through C, which should be ½ inch to the left of A. Draw needle

down through D, which should be ½ inch to the right of A, creating a loop.

⑤ Draw needle up through B, inside loop; this will be your new point A. Draw needle down, outside of loop and ½ inch from A on center line; this will be your new point B.

⑥ Repeat steps 4 and 5, moving C and D ½ inch forward along edges of leaf each time. Leave space at the end for a stem.



### SEE GUIDE FOR SOURCES

ONLINE: MORE EMBROIDERY PROJECTS  
[marthastewart.com/embroidery](http://marthastewart.com/embroidery)





### raffia tote bag

To make matching pom-poms for a hat, see the cocktail-set instructions, right.

#### PREPARATION

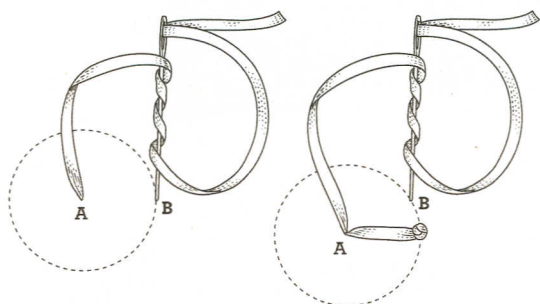
① Start with a canvas tote and raffia in 3 shades. Using a disappearing-ink fabric pen, draw circles on tote, 1 for each sunburst (ours are 1½ to 5 inches in diameter).

② Mark the center point of a circle (A) and 1 point anywhere along the circle's edge (B). Thread a large-eyed needle with raffia in desired color, knotting it before embroidering design using a French-knots-on-stalks stitch.

#### FRENCH-KNOTS-ON-STALKS STITCH

③ Draw needle up through A. Wrap raffia around needle 3 times. Holding wrapped portion together, gently draw needle down through B, forming French knot.

④ Repeat step 3, always coming up through A but moving B ¼ inch over, until the sunburst is complete.



### raffia cocktail set

The pom-poms used for the stirrers can also be used to trim a straw hat, left. To make only the pom-poms, follow step 1, then attach to hat with embroidery thread.

① Make the drink stirrers: Using a pom-pom maker and raffia, make a pom-pom (ours are 1½ inches in diameter). Wrap center with floral wire, twisting wire with pliers to secure. Trim wire to ½ inch. Repeat to make more pom-poms, using raffia in different colors.

② Using white floral tape, attach trimmed wire from each pom-pom to a bamboo skewer. Trim each skewer to desired length.

③ Decorate the pitcher: Cut 2 pieces of double-sided tape (3 inches each). Place halfway down side of pitcher, on opposite sides. Wrap raffia around pitcher and over tape, forming a wide band.

**SUNSPOTS** Above: Mini raffia pom-poms atop bamboo skewers create a stir. Bright-green raffia wrapped around the pitcher provides more texture. Left: A plain canvas tote and a straw beach hat are turned into original creations.