

GUBI

All About Rattan

Material Background



All about rattan

Derived from the Malay word 'rotan', rattan is the name for more than 600 species of climbing palms belonging to the subfamily Calamoideae that grow in hilly tropical regions with hot climates and high levels of rainfall. As a result, most of the world's rattans are sourced from the forests of the Indonesian archipelago, and there are also centers of production in other regions of South and Southeast Asia, as well as some parts of Africa and Australia.

Rattans are lianas — long-stemmed rooted vines that rely on trees and other foliage for their structural support. Using hooks or spines, rattan canes hug onto tree trunks and branches, pulling their way from the forest floor to the canopy, some growing up to hundreds of meters long.

Versatility of use

Although rattan is not a true wood, its flexibility and durability have made it a popular material with furniture makers for millennia, and the ease with which it can be manipulated into different forms and patterns has made rattan the ideal companion to almost every style of decorative art. The fact it can be bent into curving three-dimensional forms makes rattan ideal for prototyping, and its ability to be woven creates countless possibilities for makers to express their individual style.

Each part of the stem can be used in different ways. The outer bark can be stripped off and used for weaving and caning, while the inner reed-like section presents a flexible yet sturdy and highly durable material that can be used to create decorative and structural patterns and forms. The fibrous quality and strength of the rattan core makes it ideal for creating wicker furniture. As a natural, organic material, rattan is highly characterful; the markings visible on its surface tell the story of its growth, and the canes acquire a rich patina over time.

The history of rattan

Rattan is believed to be the oldest natural fiber known to man. First used by artisans in Asia, it caught the attention of Europeans during the colonial era of the 18th and 19th centuries. Encountering rattan in India

and southeast Asia, they were struck by its balance of attractiveness and practicality.

During the height of the British Empire in the 19th century, tropical furniture was extremely popular. Officials that had been stationed in Asia and the tropics returned to the UK with their rattan furnishings. Following the lead of Italian architect and set designer Renzo Mongiardino, who brought rattan indoors with the hope of introducing a more relaxed, informal atmosphere, they brought their furniture inside in response to the cooler British climate and the trend soon caught on.

The lightweight furniture that emerged naturally from the wicker-weaving techniques deployed became popular again during the Arts and Crafts movement in mid-19th century Britain. As the 20th century heralded the rise of cinema, Hollywood set designers turned to rattan furniture for their outdoor scenes, evoking a sense of South-Sea-island romance that style-conscious audiences loved and sought to emulate in their own homes.

Having become the standard material for caning since its arrival in the West, rattan was used for everything from lampshades, log baskets and coffee tables to headboards, room dividers and sofas. It could be found in cafés and nightclubs, airplane interiors and Impressionist artworks — there was seemingly no setting that rattan couldn't enhance. Many of the great designers of the 20th century have been drawn to rattan's versatility. Leading lights of the international design scene including Gio Ponti, Gabriella Crespi, and Jacques Adnet returned to the material again and again, as did many mid-century Danish masters such as Arne Jacobson, Viggo Boesen, Nanna and Jørgen Ditzel, and Tove and Edvard Kindt-Larsen. These pioneers used rattan to create iconic pieces of modernist furniture, demonstrating bold new possibilities for the material and setting the bar for rattan furniture production today.

Manufacture

When it is processed, the bark is removed from the rattan cane and sanded down to a beautiful smooth surface, which can be polished in its natural golden state, or stained and lacquered in any desired color.

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The canes are also used with the bark intact for a more rustic feel. 80% of the world's rattan resources grow in Indonesia, where GUBI's rattan furniture is made. By producing so close to the material's source, GUBI is able to utilize local craftsmanship and work with traditional artisans with generations of experience in processing and weaving rattan. Treated with a water-based lacquer, GUBI's rattan products are made by hand using all-natural skin-on rattans of the Manao and Tohiti species – these varieties have the highest density, which makes them exceptionally strong, and means they can accept screws without risk of damaging the stem or the screw falling out.

Sustainability

Rattan stems regenerate every five to seven years, making rattan one of the world's fastest-growing natural materials, and therefore a highly sustainable choice, as long as the canes are not cut before they reach maturity. Like all plants, rattan vines convert atmospheric carbon dioxide to oxygen and, because they grow by hugging trees, their cultivation has been indirectly linked to the preservation of rainforests. Rattan is easier to harvest and transport than timber, which makes it an attractive alternative to wood in many applications. In addition, the fact that rattan furniture is constructed through weaving removes the need for glue.

Rattan furniture combines strength and durability with a timeless aesthetic, which gives it a longer lifespan than many other furniture materials. And, as well as being an inherently practical material rarely requiring repair or replacement, rattan never falls out of fashion, as is shown by its enduring popularity throughout many different cultures across the centuries.

Common misconceptions

The term 'rattan' is often used interchangeably with 'wicker', but this is misleading. Rattan refers to the plant and the material; wicker describes a specific style of weaving and the products it produces. Rattan is one of many materials that can be used to make wicker furniture; others include cane, straw, reed and willow.

People also confuse rattan with bamboo, but there are clear differences. Bamboo has distinct growth ridges visible on the stem, and it is hollow and rigid, which means it is less durable and cannot bend. Rattan, on the other hand, is solid and dense, making it much more robust and flexible. Unlike bamboo, which can crack, splinter and snap when bent, rattan can easily be steamed and curved into different forms.

Usage and settings

Rattan furniture is intended for indoor use, but its lightweight nature means it can be readily brought outside for temporary stints in outdoor spaces – as well as allowing for easily reconfiguration of furniture layouts. This makes rattan the perfect choice for a variety of residential spaces, such as dining rooms, covered patios and kitchens – as well as offering a simple way to bring a warm domestic accent to workplaces and hospitality settings. Rattan's natural light-gold color brings brightness to any design scheme, whether classic or contemporary.

Maintenance

Rattan is very low maintenance, requiring nothing more than dusting with a cloth or a gentle vacuum with a brush attachment. While it accepts stains and varnishes for aesthetic purposes, these are not necessary for its preservation – and its golden natural color is often valued in its own right. Rattan is a largely impervious material, remarkably hardwearing, and naturally resistant to heat, cold, moisture, insects and temperature fluctuations, allowing it to be transported outside for short periods. Note that much of the outdoor furniture marketed as 'rattan' is in fact made from plastic. Genuine rattan will acquire an attractive patina as it ages, resulting in timeless furniture that lasts for generations.