The Gem Scoop

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Seed Jewelry...Vegetable Ivory and Sea Beans

We are going to venture into the world of creating jewelry from seeds. The first seed we shall be discussing is vegetable ivory. Vegetable ivory is also called Tagua nut or Janina nut. Vegetable ivory is produced by trees called ivory palms, ivory-nut palms or Tagua palms. These palms grow in in the tropical rainforests of southern Panama, Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, Brazil and Peru (northwestern South America). The trees, which stand about ten feet tall and have spikey leaves, produces the nuts which are seed pods. These pods are covered with a brown covering which animals eat off before it is harvested by humans. The nut itself is about the size of a small avocado. The tree is grown from a seed, but it takes about six years before the tree will start to produce the Tagua nut. These trees are raised as a crop like pecan and walnut trees in the United States.

What is nice about this material is that it is a renewable resource because harvesting the seeds causes no damage to the tree. The palm just produces more seeds! Just one palm tree can produce hundreds of nuts each year. Since the palm and the nuts are so versatile, people who live in the rain forests used the palm and the Tagua Nut for several purposes. When the seeds first begin to dry, you can eat them. Sometimes they are mixed with other fruits for a fruit salad, made into a jelly or made into a drink. It takes about a month for the seed pods to become hard and dry. At this point they are not used for food but for other uses. They use parts of the tree and nut for building their homes. Other uses included clothing and jewelry such as necklaces and bracelets.

Because of the hardness and color of the Tagua nut, they are used to imitate animal ivory so the elephant and walrus can thank the palm tree. This nut is almost the same color, texture and strength of elephant ivory. It can also be used in the place of plastic. It has made a fine substitute for ivory, but it is also beautiful in its own right.

Vegetable ivory is ideal for jewelry for several reasons. First, it is very hard so it can be carved or sliced into shapes and sections. It is so hard that the jewelry maker must use hacksaws and files to carve it into the shapes he or she wants. Second, the vegetable ivory can be dyed. Dyes are used to change the color of the piece or to bring out the ivory look of a piece of jewelry. The color, however, is just on the surface. The interior will still be the natural color of the material and the edges of the piece are usually darker. Third, it can be polished. In a nutshell, no pun intended, about anything that can be done with elephant ivory can be created with vegetable ivory.

In addition to jewelry, Tagua nut is used to make dice, knife handles, pipes, mah-jongg tiles, dominoes, scrimshaw, umbrella handles, purse handles, buttons, and chess pieces. During World I and World War II, U.S. uniforms were made from Tagua because of its durability.

While your Tagua jewelry is very hard and durable, it does require some special care. The biggest concern is water so do not wear your Tagua jewelry in the shower, hot tub or swimming pool. Take off your Tagua nut rings before you wash your hands. The water

will not destroy the jewelry itself, but water can damage the design, or cause the jewelry to warp or crack. You can polish your Tagua jewelry with beeswax. Store your Tagua nut jewelry in a non-humid location.

*The next seed we are going to talk about that is used for decorations and jewelry is **Sea Beans**. Some other names include deer-eye beans, ox-eye beans, hamburger seed and sea pearls. They come in all shapes and sizes. They can be a small as a dime and as large as a walnut. They have a rather interesting life cycle before they end up as jewelry. The Sea beans are seeds and seed pods that come from tropical plants which usually grow along the Amazon. The pods and the beans fall off the vine and then float in the oceans sometimes for years before popping up on some seashore. They float because they have air trapped inside the pod. There are several kinds of Sea Bean. Shinies have a hard outer covering which can be polished. Corkies have a warbled outer coating. One place we can go if we want to gather them is Padre Island National Seashore. They can also be found along the Florida coast.*