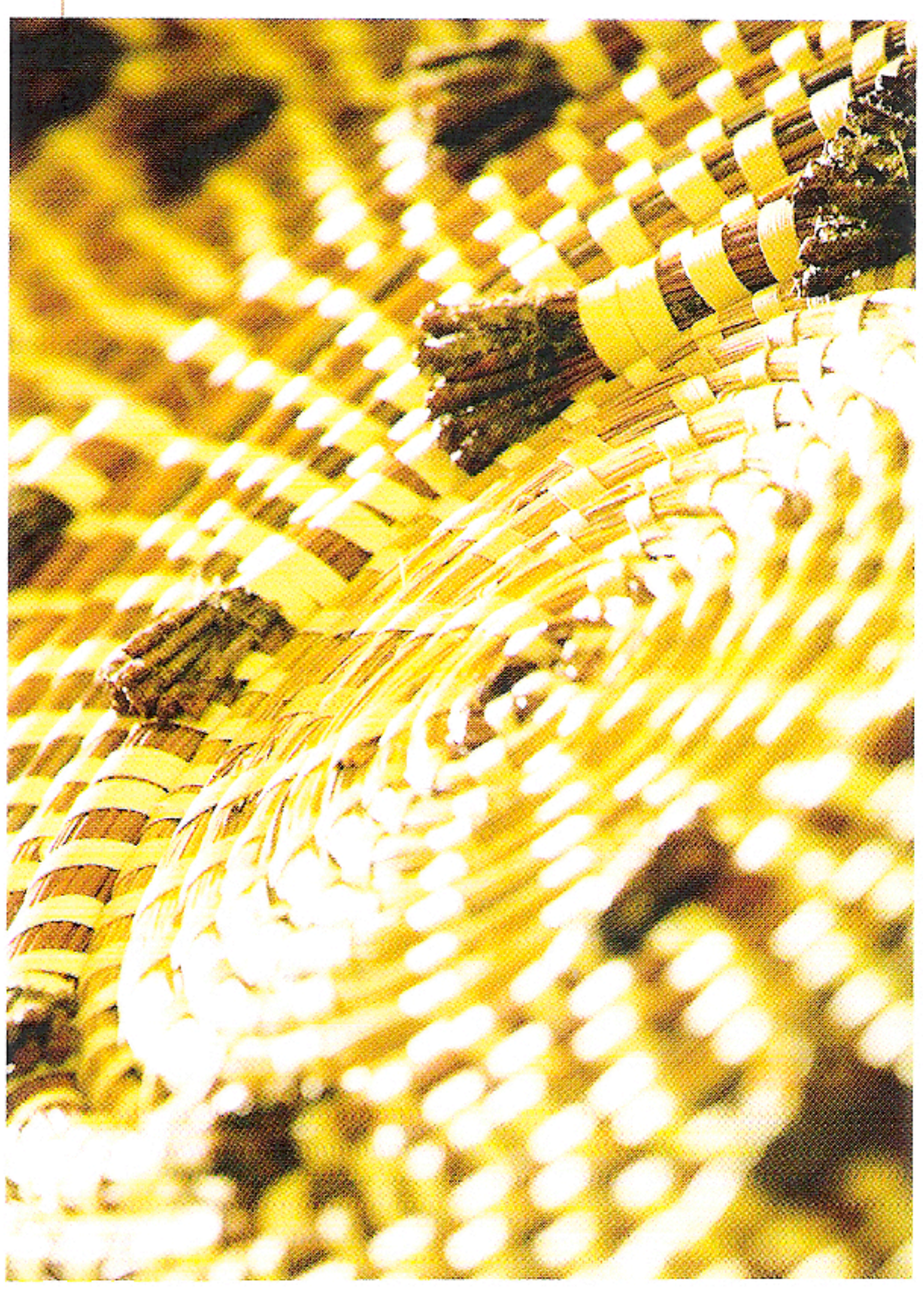
Grass Roots

Pearl and Tim Ascue fill their Awendaw home with the Lowcountry's legendary sweetgrass baskets.

WRITTEN by Aleigh Acerni PHOTOGRAPHS by Matt Scott

A Passion for the Craft: *(above and opposite page)* Though the Ascues often take leisurely drives to browse the wares of area weavers, a number of their prized baskets were commissioned purchases. "I asked my good friend Yvonne Holden to make this hat for me, and I wear it all the time," says Pearl of the sweetgrass hat worn in the above photo. The couple even had a replica of her beloved "oyster" basket painted onto their sunroom floor by her nephew.

Tricks of the Trade: *(right)* Though similar materials are often used to craft traditional sweetgrass baskets—a combination of bulrush, sweetgrass, palmetto, and pine needles—technique varies. "Every artist weaves differently, even within families," says Pearl.



Strolling into her kitchen, Lowcountry native Pearl Ascue plucks an immense basket from its perch on the table and holds it up to one of her west-facing windows. Peering into the large fanner—so named for its use in fanning rice into the air to separate the chaff—she proclaims with no small measure of pride, "This is a tight weave; look, you can't see any light through it, can you? This artist is very good."

In her home, Pearl is equal parts collector and tour guide, recounting not just her own kinship to the historic trade of sweetgrass basketmaking, but the wide-ranging techniques of the weavers she has met along the way. It's a quick, *Reader's Digest*-size lesson, but she and her husband Tim know their subject matter well. They've been collecting for more than 20 years and, like the stretch of Highway 17 that runs through Mount Pleasant or the makeshift storefronts dotting the sidewalks of downtown, all manner of artists are represented here—as are their stories.

It's little wonder that these baskets draw so much interest; the African-born tradition of sweetgrass basketmaking has been prevalent here for more than three centuries, playing an integral—and very visible—role in Lowcountry culture. "Because the trade and techniques are passed through generations, each basket is like a handmade extension of the family tree," says Pearl, who explains that most are woven from bulrush, sweetgrass, pine needles, and palmetto fronds. "Still, technique varies for every artist, even within families;