

# A Guide to Willow

## Willow Planting

Willow is a versatile plant which is often used to create attractive, natural and practical structures, such as – dens, tunnels and mazes.

Willow roots easily from unrooted cuttings or whips, when you plant freshly cut long whips or short cuttings. The willow should be cut and planted after leaf fall and before leaf bud – that would usually mean late November to late February/early March.

Any variety with sufficient growth can be used but the faster growing varieties that produce long straight whips are best especially for larger structures. Viminalis varieties are probably the most suitable but others can be used for varying stem colour/leaf/catkin interest within the structure.

## Site Preparation

An ideal soil would be a good moist loamy one, but Willow will do well in most soil conditions.

The planting site should be dug over, cleared of weeds and grass with fertiliser/manure added if appropriate. If the soil has a tendency to dry out quickly organic matter should be added.

Planting through an appropriate membrane or good mulch will help in weed control later on but is not essential. Tree guards can be used if you have a particularly bad problem with hares, rabbits or deer.

### **Woven/Criss Cross Fedges (living fences/hedges – hence 'Fedge')**

Push unrooted whips at least 6 inches (15cm) into the ground at an angle of 45 to 60 degrees about 12 inches (30cm) apart along the line of your required Fedge.

Then go back the other way planting in between the first whips at a similar angle in the opposite direction.

Either, just tie together\* where they cross or, preferably, as you are planting, weave the whips 'one in front, one behind' and you will find you have a very rigid structure.

You can then plant some verticals which you bend over to join each other to form arches, add some further weaving, create circular windows ..... whatever you wish.

NB. As an example, using 6 ft (1.8 m) long willow whips planted at an angle of around 45 degrees the basic height of the initial fedge will be around 4 ft (1.2 m) – but the willow will sprout growth which will easily double that height to provide a screen through the rest of the year.

## Arches/Tunnels/Arbours

Push the longest sturdiest whips at least 6 inches (15cm) into the ground vertically to make the main skeleton of the living willow structure, bend over and weave and tie together\*. Then add diagonals interwoven for strength to create an open lattice interlinked feature where the tension of the willow generally holds the structure fairly rigid even before it roots.

\*Biodegradable twine is ideal for initial securing – on the basis that pressure grafting and woven in new growth will then hold the structure securely after the first season. You can also use willow or synthetic ties.

## Any other living willow structure

Whips should be pushed about 6 to 9 inches (15cm to 23cm) into the ground.

Vertically planted whips tend to sprout fresh growth only from the top, whereas diagonally planted whips should sprout along the full length giving a denser growth to the structure – so try to plant as many whips as possible at an angle.

Willow will start to sprout new growth in March/April. The new stems can be trimmed back or woven into the structure as you wish.

## Maintenance

For a willow structure to become established and to grow well, it is essential that you keep the base of the structure clear of weeds and grass – say 6 inches (15 cm) either side of the planted whips.

If there is a long dry spell during the first year of planting, please water the structure if at all possible – a good soak once a week is better than a watering can full every day.

Once the new growth is long enough, it can be (and much should be) woven into the original structural framework (again, as diagonally as possible will help form a more dense structure).

Some of the whips that are not woven in may become quite long and thick and it may be necessary to trim these off before the winter tidy – it is especially important that this is done to any such whips growing on the top of the structure, as their weight could weaken it.

# Storage, Preparation and Use of Willow

## Using willow for 'dead' weaving projects

When freshly harvested, willow is very pliable (it's called green willow), and it remains so for several months if stored somewhere cool, dark and airy, such as a shady spot outside or in a garage or a shed.

If you make something with freshly cut willow be aware that the weaving will loosen as it dries and shrinks, potentially, leaving gaps in the weaving.

Ideally, you should wait, say, 6 weeks from cutting before using it to allow dry a little, whilst still being flexible.

If you're using recently cut willow during the winter and early spring there should be no need to soak it

However, once the willow has become more dried (it's then called brown willow) – from, say, late April onwards it will probably\* need soaking before it is pliable enough to use.

\*It will depend on your planned use, willow that will break if you try to bend it too tightly may still be useable for other projects, such as garden edging, without soaking.

## Soaking

Once your willow is too dry and brittle to work with for your project it will need to be soaked.

Soak dried willow by totally submerging it in clean water (it will need weighing down as its inclination is to float).

How long to soak depends on the thickness of the stems and how dry they have become – it will, to a certain extent, be a case of trial and error. Soaking for too long and it may become slimy, too short a time and the willow will be too rigid still. A rule of thumb is to soak for one day per foot of length so, four foot lengths of willow should be soaked for four days.

*However*, that doesn't allow for how much the willow has dried out. Willow of around 6 ft long cut in the winter will need soaking for about 6 days in early summer, increasing to around 10 days in the autumn.

The temperature can also affect timings – soaking may need to be longer in colder weather and shorter in warmer weather. However, using warmer water will decrease the time needed to soak.

One way to test if the willow has been soaked enough is to bend a whip at a right angle near the butt end (thick end) – dig a thumb nail in on the inside of the whip to help – if it cracks on the back of the bend it isn't ready so put it back in to soak for another day or so.

Remember that shorter lengths of willow will be ready sooner than longer lengths – the longer lengths will have a thicker butt end that will need a bit longer soaking – so, maybe stagger putting very different sorted lengths in to soak.

When the willow has been soaked for long enough, take it out of the water, rinse it down with clean water and stand it upright briefly, to allow excess water to run off.

Wrap the willow in an old towel or blanket to mellow for a few hours or ideally overnight. This allows the willow to absorb moisture more fully and so be pliable for longer.

Following this process, the willow should be then be useable for a number of days if it is kept wrapped up and somewhere cool. Whilst you're actually using the willow, keep it covered so that it doesn't dry out.

### Treatment of willow left outdoors

After a few years, willow used outside – for hurdles, border edging, plant supports or garden decorations – will become more fragile from exposure to the elements. If it's possible to take the woven willow into a drier environment for the worst of the winter weather, then this will help it last a little longer.

The generally recommended treatment for woven willow used outside to help prolong its life is a 50 : 50 mix of linseed oil and turps. Alternatively, try applying a general garden wood preservative.

Try to treat the willow at least once a year.

### Extra Hints & Tips

If you need to soak the willow before using it make sure you plan ahead – work out when you want to use the willow (making sure you will have the time to use it).

Most projects will need a mix of different lengths of willow – it helps to sort them into the lengths required before soaking/using them so that you can easily access what you need.

Only soak as much as you think you will need – any unused willow that is left over, can be dried out thoroughly and re-soaked when needed again – but don't do this too many times. (If you forget about left over willow you may find it has become mouldy).

## Choosing The Right Willow For You

### **Salix Viminalis “Bowles Hybrid”**

One of the most vigorous and hardy varieties of willow commonly available. Because of its fast rate of growth (up to 10 feet (3 m) or more in one year) it makes an excellent windbreak, and it tolerates wet, heavy soils and extreme conditions, such as cold winds on exposed sites or salty winds on the coast. Growth can be cut back each winter, providing heavy weaving material, or rods for living willow structures, and encouraging denser fresh growth, or left to grow taller and thicker which can be cut in later years for logs.

### **Salix Triandra (Almond leaved willow)**

This species prefers slightly less harsh conditions to Salix Viminalis, although is still very vigorous providing at least 6 ft (1.8 m) of fresh growth each year. It is necessary to cut back annually to obtain the fresh growth, which is ideal for fine rods for basket making. The straight rods of growth make this form of Willow very popular for basket making.

### **Salix Purpurea (Purple Willow)**

Named for the colourful catkins. Generally a little smaller and slightly less vigorous than the above varieties, the more slender elegant stems more than make up for this if you have a more sheltered location. Long, narrow leaves and at least 4 to 6 ft (1.2 to 1.8 m) of fresh stem growth each year. It needs to be cut back annually to obtain the fresh growth, which is ideal for the straight, fine rods that make this form of willow very popular for basket making.

### **Salix Candida (American hoary-leaved willow or sage leaf willow)**

A very attractive more ‘shrubby’ willow with thicker stems, growing 4 to 5 ft (1.2 to 1.5 m) per year in sheltered locations. It has large “furry” grey-green leaves, with plump yellow catkins in the Spring. Whilst ornamental in the garden, it is not a variety generally used for weaving, but can be used for decorative cut stems as well as additions to weaving projects.

### **Salix Matsudana ‘Tortuosa’ (Corkscrew, Contorted or Dragons Claw Willow)**

An initially slower-growing, but stunning form of willow, with curling/twisting stem growth making a wonderful specimen tree. Its growth is more vigorous once the plant is established, but regular pruning can be used to maintain a more compact size if preferred and this also encourages the extra “curly” younger growth. It has glossy, green, slightly curled, narrow leaves which are retained much later than the other forms of willow we have and which come again very early in the spring.

### **Salix Burjatica ‘Germany’**

A fairly vigorous variety originally grown for bio-mass/fuel with slightly ‘furry’ stems that can grow up to 9 ft (2.7 m) long in one year (making it an alternative source of long whips for creating living willow structures).

It has quite large (but not ‘showy’ like Candida and Daphnoides Aglaia) catkins in late winter.

## Coloured Willow Varieties:

**Salix Alba Vitellina (Golden Willow)** The slender whips are popular for basketmaking, but are most widely grown for the bright yellow stem colour for winter interest. They should be cut back annually in the spring to obtain the brightly coloured fresh growth. Usually the new stem growth will reach at least 6 ft (1.8 m) long in one season.

### **Salix Alba Britzensis (Coral Bark Willow)**

Mainly grown for the bright orangey/red stem colour as winter interest. They should be cut back annually in the spring to obtain the brightly coloured fresh growth. Usually the new stem growth will reach at least 6 ft (1.8 m) long in one season.

### **Salix Daphnoides Aglaia (Violet Willow)**

Mainly grown for the deep purple stem colour for winter interest and the large abundant silver catkins in late winter/early spring. Commonly used to attract pollinating insects to orchards. They should be cut back annually in the spring to obtain the brightly coloured fresh growth. The new stem growth can reach 9 ft (2.7 m) long in one season.

### **Salix Fragilis (Crack Willow)**

Two-tone olive-green to yellow/orange stems. Cut back annually in the spring to obtain the brighter coloured fresh growth. Usually the new stem growth will reach at least 6 ft (1.8m) long in one season.