

Basketry Willow

By Priscilla Feld

May 23, 2008

Use easy-to-grow willow to create beautiful baskets and more.

As a basketmaker and gardener, I think willow is about the greatest plant there is. It has two of my favorite qualities in a plant:

1. It grows everywhere.
2. It is hard to kill!

The history of willow goes back to at least 150 B.C. Woven willow was used to support walls and for carrying materials. Woven baskets were used for agriculture, as seed containers and gathering baskets, as well as for fishing.

Willow is grown commercially and can be bought from a number of growers. There are more than 300 species of willow (genus: *salix*), which means there are more than 300 colors from which to choose. In the fall, when the bundles are lined up on the porch, it's dazzling. The colors range from pale black to yellow to ruby red.

Growing

All willows have the ability to root from every part of the stem, a process known as totipotency.

Willows tolerate wet soil better than many plants; therefore, they can be grown in almost any soil and climate.



Salix purpure, a willow, shown here growing at Dunbar Gardens in Mount Vernon.

Photo courtesy of Dunbar Gardens.

In our area, cuttings should ideally be taken in January or February, before willow buds begin to swell and the sap rises. To do this, I cut 10-inch lengths of willow rods, about pencil size in diameter. I place the cuttings in an unsealed plastic bag and put them somewhere cool, but protected from freezing.

As soon as the soil can be worked in the spring, I push each cutting into the ground with at least two buds above ground. I allow 10 to 12 inches between cuttings in rows approximately two feet apart. This tight planting forces the willow to grow tall and slender as it searches for light.

Weeding is very important the first few years. To control unwanted plants, use black plastic, or mulch with grass clippings or straw. In older willow beds, weeds are less of a problem because the mature plants shade the weeds and crowd them out.

First-year growth can be branchy, but the growth pattern improves over the years as the plant matures. Cut the willow to ground level in late fall, winter or very early spring. The cut rods can be used for weaving or as cuttings to increase the size of your willow bed the following spring.

Over the years, the plants will begin to form a “stool” (stump), with multiple shoots appearing every spring. It should take about three years to develop a good, strong stand of usable willow.

Gathering

It’s fun to gather materials in their natural habitat. The rods you collect should be long and pliable. Try bending the rod in a gentle curve. If there is too much pith it will snap, and when dry there will be no substance to it. Remember, though, if you intend to harvest materials from someone else’s property, be sure to ask permission from the landowner!

Space constraints prevent me from going into detail on how to weave beautiful, useful creations with willow, but there are abundant resources out there just waiting to get you started. Here are three of my favorites:

- *Willow Work*, by Mary Butcher. Self-published, 1995.
- *Willow, Oak and Rye: Basket Traditions in Pennsylvania*, by Jeannette Lasansky. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979.
- *Cane, Rush and Willow: Weaving with Natural Materials*, by Hilary Burns. Firefly Books, 1998.



A variety of beautiful baskets and containers can be made using willow and other natural materials—you’re limited only by your imagination. Photo by Jeff Feld.



Skagit County Master Gardener and basketmaker Priscilla Feld names the willow as one of her favorite plants—and loves to put it to functional and artistic use. Photo by Jeff Feld