

A weaver's TALE

Debbie Hall weaves beautiful objects from willow. Lisa Millard learns about the art of basketry.

Pictures by David Johnson



T

here's no mistaking the home of willow artist Debbie Hall. Tucked beside the picket garden gate is a pretty woven willow seat announcing your arrival at Salix Arts. The chair is planted – a living willow seat – and its back rods are shooting skywards, reaching for the watery warmth of the early spring sun before bursting into verdant summer bloom. The seat is a favourite spot for locals and dog walkers to take a moment to enjoy the Shudy Camps village views.

Open the garden gate and the wide front lawn, tufty and wild, has more willow offerings to catch the eye. A huge weeping willow tree, now cropped and bald, stands in front of the 16th century chocolate-box thatched cottage beside a twisted willow, its branches gnarled into arthritic knots. Debbie has built a living willow dome sculpture, complete with a woven rocking

chair, in one south-facing corner of the garden. A small opening means adults have to bend down to fit inside the door – it's charming and has a touch of *Alice in Wonderland* to its dimensions.

'living' room

"I can just about get a wi-fi signal from here, so I sometimes do admin sitting in my outdoor willow room," says Debbie, as she deftly feeds newly-sprouted wispy branches into the woven loops and arches of the sculpture. "I only planted this last year and it's already grown loads. It will look lovely when the buds burst into leaf." As the planted willow rods show their summer splendour the dome will be covered by a natural green blanket – it's a 'living' room in every sense and Debbie is

regularly commissioned to build the domes for primary schools as a teaching space and learning resource for young children.

"Children tend to play more imaginatively in a natural structure because it can be anything they want it to be – a den, ship, castle or house. The shape does not limit them. Living willow is full of wildlife too – particularly ladybirds – and it's excellent for teaching children about plant life cycles and photosynthesis," says Debbie, who is currently mid-project at a school where she is building three large live willow domes interconnected by two tunnels. »



» In the back garden, willow screens, garden sculptures, plant supports, giant pods, curvy border fences and a living willow throne are spotted throughout the two-acre space. A painted summer house, where Debbie runs her willow weaving and basketry workshops, stands beside a canopied natural gazebo (supported by chunky wooden poles made from tree trunks) where, during summer months, Debbie and her workshop students can weave their magic al fresco. There's a natural wildlife pond (it used to be a swimming pool until the pump system broke down) where living willow circles float across the still water like abandoned woven swimming rings; these already have shoots pushing skywards that will sprout into rustling leaf later this month. It's an idyllic setting.

"I think we were meant to live here," says Debbie, who shares the home she moved to six years ago with two teenage daughters and husband Matt. "We used to live in Linton and weren't even planning to move quite yet, but, when we saw this house, we were smitten. There's three types of willow tree in the garden and the space was perfect for me to run workshops here."

A painted wooden panel wall inside the workshop showcases Debbie's artwork on small shelves sliced from a tree trunk. There are baskets of all shapes and sizes, beautifully made using different types of willow that add a range of tones to the weave, from russet reds and glowing corals to moss greens and charcoal blacks. The effect is stunning. My

favourite is a tote-shaped basket that Debbie has given an angled twisted-hazel handle – it looks like it should grace the fashion pages of *Vogue* and it's now top of my wishlist.

"I like to add my own style to traditional shapes and structures to make them a little bit different; bring a new twist to an older design," says Debbie, who started willow weaving as a hobby when her children were young. "I enjoy pushing the boundaries a bit and taking a traditional craft to a new level. There are always new techniques to learn – it's one of the things I love about basketry."

Among the baskets, there's woven birdhouses, a wind-chime ring complete with willow bird perched at the end of a long rod (I imagine the bird will bob about in the wind), pods and sculptures with pineapple tops. Low stool-tables, used by Debbie's students, have two holes in the leg supports where the basic basketry tools needed slot in neatly – a bodkin and a pair of secateurs will do the job. "Basketry is very hands-on," says Debbie. "It's just me and the willow."

shaping up

A committee member of The Basketmakers' Association, which champions basketry and allied crafts, Debbie exhibits regularly and her work can be seen in the show *Basketry Identity*, running until April 26 at Riverhouse Barn Arts Centre, Manor Road, Walton-on-Thames, Surrey. She has built her skills over the years attending various courses, including those taught by Mary Butcher, considered the doyenne of British basketry, at Cambridge University Botanic Garden. Mary has stepped down from taking classes at the Botanic Garden and Debbie is now teaching basketry there (see page 54 for workshop details), as well as creating in-situ garden structures for a variety of bespoke commissions.

"When I worked at the university library years ago I used to pop into the Botanic Garden during lunchtime before my willow life began. I went to a couple of Mary's classes there in my early days, so it's very nice to be back now teaching with the willow."

But Debbie, a fine art graduate, didn't begin her working life in basketry. After leaving university, where she met husband Matt, a

research biologist, they headed to the States when Matt was offered a job in Washington DC. They stayed for two years and Debbie worked in the library for the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Returning to the UK, the couple set up home in Duxford, near to the neuroscience research centre where Matt was based. Debbie was working at the University of Cambridge departmental libraries and they started family life.

"The garden there was very flat – just a vegetable patch and lawn – and needed shaping up. There was a shop near to the house that sold amazing huge ceramic pots, but they were just too expensive. What I could afford was a couple of sturdy woven plant supports – when I installed them in the garden, I was struck with the thought 'I bet I could do that' – and that's where the passion began. I went on a two-day basketry course in Rutland and just loved it. My first basket actually looked and functioned like a basket and it was such a pleasure to make – basketry requires enough attention to take your mind off other things, but not enough to make it hard work."

Debbie didn't struggle to weave willow into lots of pleasing shapes. "As an artist I've always had a good 3D sense and creativity runs in the family – there's been tailors and stonemasons down the line, and my great-great grandfather restored the medieval figures on Wells Cathedral. I used to make toys for myself when I was a child and I knit and sew. There's craft energy there."

As Debbie filled the family garden with woven willow fences, sculptures and plant supports, friends started asking her to make the same sort of things for their gardens.

"And there were more requests when I started making baskets. My hobby slowly evolved into a business at a pace that matched family life." It still does – her daughters and husband (Matt's a dab hand at willow knots) provide cooking and baking support for her workshops and they all help as willow sorters and bundlers. »

