



» Debbie discovered a love of teaching at a summer music festival (Debbie and Matt met through a shared love of live music). In 2004, during a family trip to the Small World Festival in Kent, Debbie was sitting on the grass weaving willow lanterns to hold candles in glass jars when she noticed people watching her. A few asked her to show them how to do it and, at that moment, the festival organiser happened to pass – Debbie soon found herself booked to teach a willow lantern session at the next festival.

close to nature

It was only a matter of time before Debbie's talent became more widely known and she soon took up the post of willow site-decoration artist for the Somerset-based Sunrise festival (now held in Wales), which she worked on for seven summers. "We made everything – giant toadstools for people to sit under and a massive sun for the back of the main stage mixing desk – all sorts."

A woven figure of a woman, called *Lady Spring*, stands beside the pond in Debbie's garden, her back bent, face turned upwards and arms open to the sky in

a yoga-style pose, her long strands of golden raffia hair swaying in the breeze. "I made *Lady Spring* for a knitting and craft show held at Olympia, London, a couple of years ago," says Debbie. She's still looking good.

Every summer Debbie is booked to create extraordinary sculptures for festivals and events, and the converted ambulance, parked on her driveway, provides transport, mobile home and willow storage throughout the festival season. She uses locally-grown willow which is pesticide free. "I could probably buy in what I need slightly cheaper but I like the willow being grown locally and I know there are no nasties on it, so it's safe for everyone to handle and work with. It's better that way. Working with the willow at every stage brings you very close to the natural cycles of the seasons."

After the willow is harvested (it's all cut, sorted and bundled by hand and Debbie has a team of "wonderful" helpers "with strong backs"), the rods are dried out in a long polytunnel in Debbie's garden.

Bunches of rods are all stacked together in neat bundles and the range of colours and tones is breathtaking – colours will differ according to weather and drying conditions. Before the willow can be worked it needs to be soaked for two weeks and Debbie has a huge cattle trough for this job.



"If I need to soak more than the trough will hold, I can use the pond in an emergency. Estimating quantities can be tricky, but I was recently given an old chest freezer by a friend and have discovered that I can freeze any leftover soaked rods and then defrost them as required.

You can't re-soak rods, so freezing cuts down on waste. I don't think this technique is common practice but it works for me."

Everything willow related works for Debbie. "I've never been bored with willow. There's always something new to learn or something new to do with it. It's kept me captivated for nearly 20 years. Working with willow feeds my soul – willow is definitely my thing."

For more details about basketry workshops with Debbie Hall see salixarts.co.uk and facebook.com/SalixArts.

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