

Learning through willow

We often talk of utilising our outdoor spaces in better, more imaginative ways, but what options do you have if your setting is not teeming with nature? Willow could well provide a sustainable solution.



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WILLOW IS sustainable, versatile and an excellent way to link children with nature, but it is also a valuable tool for the imagination.

Recent research published by the DfES describes the school grounds as 'a rich multi-faceted resource on the doorstep', offering 'excellent opportunities for both formal and informal learning and play'. Outdoor learning can encourage healthy exercise and links with nature – a natural environment is also believed to enhance concentration levels. So, how can early years practitioners use willow to provide focus and educational opportunities in their setting?

Why use willow?

Willow is a fast growing, sustainable and biodegradable plant that is relatively cheap and easy to grow. There are over 300 different species to choose from, and colours, height and growth rates vary. Without thorns, willow is easy to handle, and popular in a range of settings because of its natural beauty and colour.

It is a versatile plant, blending into many different landscapes and absorbing carbon from the atmosphere, while providing shelter and food for a variety of wildlife. Using willow is an excellent way to link children with nature, as part of a shared creative experience.

Willow also has many possible curriculum links and children will be fascinated to learn that it dates back to the last Ice Age. The environment is an obvious focus for willow and there are many natural and biological avenues to pursue, such as plant growth, insect cycles and natural habitats.

Some teachers use it for a Maths focus, discussing measuring, shapes and symmetry, while others look at the uses of willow through the ages, including furniture making, cricket bat manufacture and basketry. You could also explore a possible medicinal theme because willow contains salicin, which is similar to aspirin, and it has been used to reduce fever and inflammation since Hippocrates' time in 400BC.

As well as the practical and more formal educational attractions, willow is present in legends and folklore and would often seem to have magical properties. It is no coincidence that the willow tree often features in children's literature, such as the famous *Wind in the Willows*, and other more

modern stories with characters named Willow, that include kings, ponies and friends of vampire slayers. Children seem drawn to willow structures, which stimulate their imaginations and encourage creativity.

Which construction?

There are a range of options to choose from, depending on your budget and enthusiasm. If you do not have much of either, but are keen to do something different and memorable, you could stay indoors and show the children some dried willow baskets or other such woven objects. This may be enough to start either a conversation or project on willow, but slightly older children may be able to try some weaving themselves.

Cut willow can be bought in bundles ready for weaving, and there are several online providers that sell a range of varieties. Try using a few different types with contrasting colours for a project, and remember that some colours change when the willow is dried. The dried willow will need to be soaked before use, but soaking time depends on the willow variety.

If you are feeling more adventurous, you may want to try making a living willow structure, which will increase the educational opportunities. Children, staff, and even parents and carers, can become involved in the planning and building, and if the project is managed well, the structure will remain a focus in your setting for several years. You can choose from tunnels, domes, wigwams, 'fedges' (a cross between a fence and a hedge) and perhaps more ambitious sculptures.

Several companies provide kits for living willow structures, and will send out instructions, as well as different sized 'whips' (freshly cut lengths of willow that will grow when planted). A kit for a very simple wigwam structure or tunnel can be bought for about £20 or £30, but other more complicated structures, such as a Viking Long Ship, might run to several hundred pounds.

Look closely at what you get for your money. Some kits will include photos at each stage of construction, as well as instructions, others will provide items, such as pegs, string for securing your work, and membrane or mulch to help control moisture levels and keep weeds in check. If you have some experience, or are more adventurous, you can

plan your own project and buy suitable supplies for this. Cut willow is usually available from early December until about March.

While online sales sites and nurseries may be useful for an experimental or shorter-term project, they do not usually provide the expert advice and ongoing support that an inexperienced or less confident willow grower may require. This is where many schools turn to willow artists or sculptors who will match their early years setting, team capabilities and long or short-term requirements with a suitable and manageable project.

After directing the planning stage, the artist either builds the willow construction alone, or works with the staff and children to build it, continuing to provide support and to answer questions in years to come, as the structure grows and develops.

Choosing a site

Willow will grow on a variety of soils, including polluted areas. While fertile soil will produce the best results, willow is known to clean up polluted earth and is often used for land reclamation and soil stabilisation. It can also adapt to a range of climates, enjoying sunny areas, but also tolerating shade.

Willow is a thirsty plant, and if its needs are not met the roots will wander towards water sources – make sure it will not interfere with other structures and keep it well away from concrete obstacles.

Case study

Debbie Hall – willow artist

Willow artist Debbie Hall (www.salixarts.co.uk) works in Cambridgeshire, Sussex and Essex, designing and making willow constructions and running workshops in willow weaving and basket making. She often works with schools and nurseries who want a living willow structure in their grounds but do not know where to start and are looking for ongoing support as the structure grows.

'I became interested in willow about 17 years ago after buying some impressive plant supports for my garden. Trained in Fine Art, I was drawn to its natural beauty and wanted to make use of the creative possibilities before me.

'A willow structure is completely natural and biodegradable and, chosen carefully, it does not represent one specific thing, but allows children to use their imagination. There are no rules with willow, and it is financially and technically accessible to everyone.

'Although there are many different structures to choose from, you need something that can be used as much as possible, so try to think multi-purpose. Tunnels sound exciting, and can look pretty, but there is not much to do in a tunnel. They become a speedy funnel for children, and are quickly destroyed. On the other hand, a living willow dome can provide a play space as well as a teaching space – a 3.5 metre dome can hold about 20 children.

'If you get the children involved in the design, even in a small way, they respect it more. They feel some kind of ownership and responsibility, wanting to tend it and water it, but also keeping an eye on the other children and making sure they play sensibly inside. You often find the level of care is not the same once that first group of children leaves the school.

'Growing willow is not complicated, but you need to plan it carefully and be aware of any future plans for the school site that may affect the structure. Willow has very invasive roots, so I would advise planting at least a metre away from concrete walls and drains. You also need decent quality soil, so make sure you are not planting on an old pile of builders' rubble. The willow should be planted at least nine or 10 inches into the ground.

'Willow does not have to be planted near water, but a boggy area can be useful if you have it. It will need regular watering to begin with, and it is important to organise watering during the holidays too. Once the structure is established it will not need huge amounts of water. To keep the structure strong and in shape, you will also need to weave in new growth, probably twice a year.



Three examples of the use and evolution of willow structures, both static (dome, left), and living, such as the arch and walkway (middle, right)

'However simple or grand the structure, willow is a beautiful addition to any playground.'

The early years setting – Harlequin Childcare, Ely

'Debbie Hall came to our setting and helped us to construct a willow dome,' explains Iona Martin. 'It has several sections ranging from low to high, which are all interconnected. The dome is an amazing living structure that the children can walk or run through, touching the different textures. One day it is a tunnel, the next a bear's cave. It encourages them to notice nature as it changes through the seasons, as well as the wildlife that lives on it.'

'Earlier this year we studied the ladybird cycle after children commented on the ladybirds they kept spotting on it. Even in winter we use the structure, and the children put fabric over it when there are no leaves and it gets a bit draughty.'

'You have to take care of the structure and remember to water it, but the children enjoy getting involved and taking their little watering cans out. Although anyone can have a go at building a willow structure, it helps if you have an expert to hand, and

we have phoned Debbie a couple of times when we were worried about something.'

Conclusion

With a bit of planning and imagination, willow can provide a beautiful, sustainable educational focus in any early years setting. It will stimulate the imagination of children as well as staff, suiting a wide range of budgets.

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Useful resources

- *Education Outside The Classroom: An Assessment of Activity and Practice in Schools and Local Authorities*. Originally published by the DCSF in 2006, downloadable from: www.education.gov.uk/research/programmeofresearch/projectinformation.cfm?projectid=14682&resultspage=1
- *Learning Outside The Classroom Manifesto*. Originally published by the DCSF in 2006, Downloadable from: <http://publications.education.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DFES-04232-2006>
- www.salixarts.co.uk – provides workshops as well as design, construction and maintenance of living willow structures.
- www.outtolearnwillow.co.uk/index.html – provides courses for teachers, school workshops and dried and living willow kits.
- www.jprwillow.co.uk/index.htm – supplies willow for various projects, as well as kits, books and lists of artists.
- www.ltd.org.uk/ – campaigns for better school grounds, working with schools and professionals to achieve this goal.
- www.whitedragon.org.uk/articles/willow.htm – an article about the magical and mythical side of willow.

Key points

- Willow is a sustainable, biodegradable, versatile and adaptable plant, dating back to the last Ice Age
- It has many curriculum links including biology, maths, history and scope for a more creative focus
- You can use living willow kits, design and build your own structure or find a willow sculptor or artist to construct or oversee a project
- Choose a multi-purpose structure, such as a dome, to provide maximum use
- Children will use and respect the sculpture more if they feel involved in the project