

Willow talk

Justine Harding discovers more about the ins and outs of willow weaving and gets creative again...

It doesn't take long to get bitten by the willow-weaving bug. It's difficult to decide what it is that gets you most – the direct and tactile nature of working with willow; the freedom to follow your imagination; or the ease with which you can create something that looks quite impressive.

Having already made an attractive and functional plant support, under the guidance of professional weaver Debbie Hall (see last issue), I was keen to do more. Although our time at Salix Arts was running out, Debbie assured me I would be able to complete a simple tray, suitable for use in the house, or for feeding the birds in the garden. So with the clock ticking to departure time, here's how I got on...



HOW TO MAKE A WILLOW TRAY OR HANGING BIRD TABLE

While willow is ideal, any flexible plant cuttings can be used – try cornus, elm or even hedge trimmings. This is also a good way to use up shorter lengths of willow left over from previous projects.



1 Starting with a long, sturdy withy, Debbie flexes the willow from the butt (thick) end with her thumbs so it's less likely to 'elbow'. She then bends the withy towards her body and into a circle, of a size suitable for a tray. I make mine smaller, for a hanging bird feeder.



2 Reaching through the circle, Debbie pulls the tip (thin end) back through. She repeats this so the tip winds around the rest of the withy and the circle holds itself together.



3 Holding the circle like a 'Q', with the butt end pointing away from her, Debbie pokes another withy butt from front to back at the top, so it lies in the same direction as the first. Holding this securely, Debbie again brings the tip repeatedly through the circle. She adds four more withies, each starting at different points of the circle.

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4 The hoop is laid down, butts uppermost, and trimmed. Next Debbie selects two sets of three sturdy sticks, positioning them across the circle and trimming to leave a two-inch overhang either end. The middle stick of each trio is turned so they lay evenly.



5 Debbie now threads a withy, butt first, under the circle from the inside, so it protrudes by two inches. The tip is taken over the first set of sticks, under the second, and out over the opposite side of the circle. A second withy is woven from the opposite side, holding the straight sticks in place.

6 This pattern is now repeated, so each stick lies the opposite way to its neighbour. As we work out from the centre, we ensure the withies sit tightly together.



7 With almost two thirds of the circle covered, Debbie trims the ends off, leaving an inch outside the circle, to allow for shrinkage. These cut-off tips are the weavers for the remaining gaps. "Or keep the central ends long to form a single handle," she says.



8 We weave until our circles are filled and the two trios of sticks are pulled together. Debbie trims hers to finish, while I keep four sets of withies long at the outer edges to form a hanger.



HOW TO GROW YOUR OWN WILLOW

You can grow your own willow for weaving in your veg plot. Cuttings can be bought online from 35p each. They need to be positioned closely, watered well, and should approximately double the shoots they produce each year.

Alternatively you can buy green or brown willow. Green willow will shoot if put straight in the ground and is used for living structures, or can be used as is, for non-living items, after drying for a few weeks. Brown willow must be soaked for one day per foot to regain its pliability.

It should then be rinsed and 'mellowed' in a damp towel for 24 hours before using.

9 I turn my tray over and draw up the long withies to form a hanger, fixing them with a rose tie (see last issue). Alternatively, attach chains from an old hanging basket or leave it plain. Reserve a couple of sticks to add in later as the wood dries and shrinks.

Not bad for a bunch of twigs and a little over half-an-hour's work!



GET WEAVING

Willow weaving courses run regularly around the country. Visit www.basketassoc.org to find a willow weaver near you or take a look at www.salixarts.co.uk to see what courses Debbie has on offer.