



Welcome to the Willow Workshop

Justine Harding looks forward to adding to the natural beauty of her garden as she tries her hand at willow weaving



Walk into Debbie Hall's garden in Cambridgeshire and the first thing that strikes you is the myriad of beautiful willow creations that pop out of every bed and border. From delicate, discreet decorative hoops and hanging bird feeders to giant leaping fish and towering 3m (10ft) plant supports, it is easy to see how willow can both make a dramatic statement and be at one with its surroundings.

Debbie has a passion for willow and its versatility. Willow weaving is now her full-time job and I'm here to benefit from her expertise. "It all began after I bought a house with a boring square plot," recalls Debbie. "I wanted some height to add interest to the garden so bought some willow plant supports. I remember thinking 'I could do that', so I went on some courses and was bitten by the bug.

"The beauty of willow is that you can do pretty much anything with it. People are always surprised by their results – it is immediate, allowing you to produce something quite large, quickly. It is also very forgiving – even if your creation is not 'perfect', it will have a natural beauty and a rustic charm." So I've come to find out whether willow-weaving is as rewarding as it sounds.

JUSTINE MAKES A WILLOW PLANT SUPPORT

HOW TO MAKE A WILLOW PLANT SUPPORT

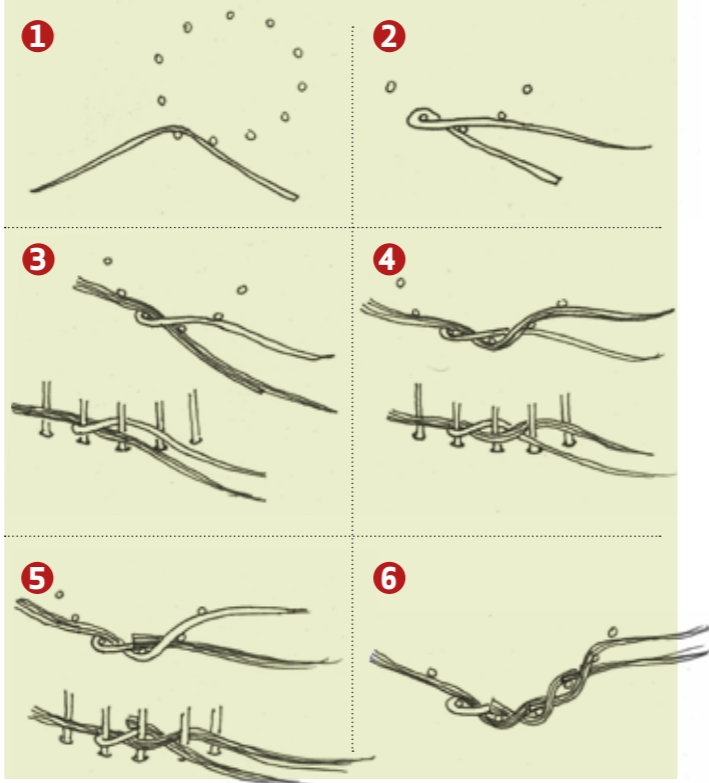


1 Debbie first hands me a fruit box which has a dozen holes punched out in a circle. We insert 12 8ft willow uprights, fat or 'butt' ends downwards and gather the tops together with a temporary tie to form a wigwam.



2 Next we create a point to secure the main weave to. Debbie takes a single withy (stem) and threads the butt to the right, behind an upright and back out leaving about a third poking out (diagram 1). Next she bends the tip (thin end) snugly around the upright, over itself and behind the next upright (diagram 2). Debbie assures me this is the trickiest part and explains both ends will be worked into the weave.

HOW TO WEAVE WILLOW



3 Debbie tells me we're using a weave called 'pairing', where two bundles of willow are entwined. She threads the butts of the first bundle of three withies along Step 2's butt end, under the loop we made and behind the upright so they are 'locked' in place (see diagram 3). This bundle, including the extra butt end, is then woven around the next anti-clockwise upright (see diagram 4).



4 Now the second bundle of three withies is threaded, butts first, along Step 2's tip end and under the first bundle (see diagram 5). The second bundle, plus the tip end, is woven over the first and around the next anti-clockwise upright.



5 Debbie explains to always work the bottom, left bundle first. First add one withy, pushing the butt along the top of this bundle, under the other bundle and behind the upright (see diagram 6). Bend the whole bundle smoothly around the upright with your thumb, over the top bundle and behind the next upright as before. Repeat this to create a twisted pattern.

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6 I quickly get into a rhythm and find the willow very satisfying to use. We complete three rounds of pairing so our plant supports have a strong base. As we work, Debbie reminds me to keep adjusting the uprights so they are evenly spaced. "You must tell the willow what to do!" she laughs.



7 Now for a gentle spiral up the wigwam. Debbie explains new withies are now fed in from the bottom, into the natural triangle created between the bundles and the uprights, while still following the same weave pattern. It's fascinating how the natural spring of the willow can so effectively provide the strength for the structure.



8 I concentrate on keeping the slope of the spiral gradual. As the wigwam narrows, Debbie advises me to use thinner withies and finally to stop adding more. We remove the temporary ties and at the top, weave around two uprights at a time to pull the willow in.



9 To finish, Debbie shows me a willow 'rose tie'. First, the butt of a thin withy is poked through the top bundle so it protrudes 10cm (4in) to the front. From the back, the withy is pulled round the bundle, over the butt and back on itself. It's then taken behind the bundle again, to the other side and looped around the butt as before. We repeat this to create the rose, before tucking the end back into the bundle for neatness. I'm amazed at how easy, attractive and effective it is.

10 Finally we trim any stray ends of willow flush and Debbie cuts the top off her wigwam for a neater look - I leave mine wild! Once removed from the fruit boxes, we fix them in the garden with a few hazel sticks driven into the ground which we cable tie the uprights to. It's fair to say I feel pretty pleased with what I've created in just over an hour!



Tie the uprights to sticks driven into the ground

THE ULTIMATE IN 'GREEN'

Not only is willow weaving one of the few things that cannot be done by machine, the weaver can see it through its full lifecycle. Willow can be grown for weaving fairly easily, before being harvested and turned into a variety of products. These in turn, particularly those designed for outside, will have a life of their own as they change before ultimately degenerating and returning completely to the soil.

GETTING HANDS ON WITH WILLOW

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.

Alternatively, you can buy willow to weave with at home. Various suppliers can be found online - however, call them to discuss your needs before ordering.

**NEXT MONTH
A WILLOW BIRD FEEDER**