

# MOVED BY WILLOW

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Having trained in Fine Art, I was first attracted to willow because I found it aesthetically pleasing. However, once I started working with it, I found that this was but one of the innumerable qualities of this most ecologically sound and versatile material.

I currently specialise in creating in-situ garden structures, from both living and non-living willow, many of which are designed with children in mind. By using willow in a creative way in the garden, I hope to produce something more than just an aid to play. Hopefully, the end result will be a beautiful object that blends easily into its natural surroundings: one that can be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities as well as its play possibilities. I often make structures that are multi-functional.



In my own garden I have constructed a large living willow seat (pictured here with my two daughters Polly and Annie and their friend Rebecca). This has been a multitude of different things in its life, from shady bench for relaxing, reading and even sleeping on, to

ship, house, and hot air-balloon to name but a few. Even when my brief is more specific (such as the tree house) the use of non-specific shapes for play structures doesn't restrict the child's imagination as much as ones more readily 'identifiable'.

Willow is tough, quick growing, tolerant of most soils, pliable and easy to use. The cycle of

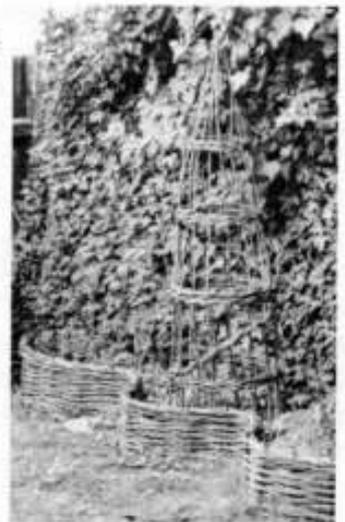


growth, harvesting, more growth provides a sustainable source of rods for new structures, and of course willow is completely biodegradable. A living willow structure allows real appreciation of the seasons: the cycle of nature is extremely apparent. Dormant in winter, the bare stems emphasise the structural shape. Early spring brings fat buds in anticipation of the new shoots and fresh leaves of late spring, and the heavy covering which provides such comfortable shade in the summer. Autumn sees the leaves drop and we begin again. Children can become very involved with the care of such structures, watering in the first summer, and weaving in or trimming off the new shoots to maintain the form. The play of light through spaces between the willow rods creates a myriad of constantly changing shapes, varying with the seasons and the time of day.

Outside, whether living or 'dead', a willow structure will respond to whatever nature throws at it, and will constantly change in ways beyond our control. Wildlife seems comfortable with the presence of willow creations. The leaves and stems team with insect life during the summer, and the top of the living arbour seat in my own garden is a regular haunt for our resident pair of blackbirds.

The flexible nature of the material allows me to create pretty much any shape that I like, and I incline towards the irregular! I tend to use curves within my work, often echoing the patterns of nature in shapes such as spirals and webs. Working on site means that I can follow the existing shapes and contours of a garden, allowing one part to flow effortlessly into another. This is particularly useful when constructing low border fencing, which can define an area without dominating, whilst supporting the plants and protecting them from balls and small feet!

Some garden structures are productive in a very real sense. Large supports for climbing



vegetables and fruits can easily double as wigwams (photo here shows my friend Deb enjoying the shelter of her grape vine). The downside, however, if your children like raw beans, is that you may not have many left for dinner!



Willow seems ultimately versatile. I was recently asked to make a pond cover that would be attractive, strong enough to prevent a toddler from falling in, while open enough to allow sun and rain in, and frogs out! I cannot think of another material that could so easily perform all these functions at once.

I find it truly rewarding being able to work outside, with natural materials creating things that are at the same time both practical and beautiful.

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