

Get Weaving

Projects for Christmas

Basic willow weaving techniques can be used to create unique Christmas presents and stylish decorations for the home. Here are some ideas for projects; a five pointed star to hang in a window at the start of Advent and a small reindeer or fir tree to hang from your Christmas tree; a wreath for your door and a globe to decorate with foliage. All can be made using simple techniques and do not need previous experience.

Reindeer and Star. The weave used for the reindeer and Christmas tree is "randing." Randing uses just one rod at a time, weaving horizontally under and over the vertical rods. The vertical rods or "sticks" form the frame of the decoration. The horizontal rods, or 'weavers,' are woven alternately behind and in front of the vertical rods fill in the shape.

Wreaths. The hoop shape is formed by coiling rods round each other, rather like a length of rope. One rod is bent round and the tip secured to create a hoop and then other rods are coiled round the hoop working in the same direction, introducing one rod at a time. Usually four rods create a strong enough hoop, but more can be added as you wish. At home the hoop can be decorated with foliage to make a traditional Christmas wreath. A globe for hanging from the ceiling can be fashioned from two hoops which are fastened one inside the other. A five pointed star hanging in the centre of the globe looks very attractive, with foliage wrapped round the hoops adding the final touch.

Projects for the garden

Peony Support. The hoop shape used horizontally is very effective as a plant support for peonies and other floppy herbaceous plants. 'Legs' made of stout lengths of Hazel or Willow lashed to the hoop and driven into the ground, hold up the foliage and look attractive as the plant grows through them.

Obelisk. A support for taller plants and climbers can be made from 12 tall vertical rods woven together with thinner weavers in a 'pairing' weave. Horizontal 'weavers' used in pairs twist round the front and back of each rod to secure the shape and form attractive bands of weaving.

Bird Feeder. A cornucopia shaped bird feeder to hold fat balls can be made with a spiralling weave. The frame of the horn is created by 12

upright rods, through which pairs of 'weavers' are woven in front and behind the uprights to spiral round and fill in the framework. The wide end of the horn is finished off with a simple border to keep the uprights in place and lastly a handle for hanging the feeder from a branch is inserted into the frame.

Free weave willow ball to hang from trees. A willow ball made from 3 hoops, fitted one inside the other form the basic globe, round which are woven thinner 'weavers', until the whole shape is covered with a skin of willow. A length of plaited twine tied through the ball forms a loop to hang the ball from a branch.

Living willow tunnel and 'wigwam' den. Both of these projects use living willow, to make structures which will grow in the garden. For the 'wigwam' the rods are planted in a circle and for the tunnel the rods are planted 3 foot or so apart, opposite each other in two parallel lines. Stout 10 foot long willow rods are driven vertically 12 inches or so into the ground to form the basic framework. The frame is strengthened with additional rods driven diagonally into the ground by each vertical rod. A temporary 'pairing' weave is used to lash the framework together until the willow grows. The wigwam shape is completed by lashing the rods together at the apex. The tunnel is formed by bending over the rods from each side of the tunnel in a smooth curve and lashing them together. Within a season, the willow will take root and the new shoots can be woven into the structure, which in time will cover the framework in a skin of willow.

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Willow

Willow is a wonderfully flexible material to weave with, although many other plant stems are capable of being woven into garden structures or baskets. 'Hedgerow Baskets', made from a variety of plant stems and often decorated with small Larch cones are very attractive, but here I will just concentrate on willow.

Willow is harvested from the withy beds in winter and stacked in the fields against fences to dry before being taken into the sheds for sorting into lengths and processing. The willow yearly cycle runs from;

- mid November to mid March when the willow is harvested during the dormant season;
- mid March to Mid May the cattle graze the beds until all danger of frost has gone;
- the growing season extends between mid May and mid September during which time the willow is sprayed to control aphids;
- and to complete the cycle, the cattle are brought back into the beds from mid September to mid November to graze off the weeds prior to harvesting.

Willow varieties. Many varieties are suitable for basketry, such as Dicky Meadows and Brittany Green, both varieties of *Salix purpurea* and Black Maul. The natural colours of the willow derive not only from the variety of willow but also from the way it has been processed:

- Brown willow has been harvested and dried with the bark on. It has a slightly greenish tinge, and is used for more rustic work, such as garden structures.
- Steamed willow, which has a glossy deep brown colour, has been dried with the bark on and then steamed for several hours, which makes it very pliable and useful for basket making.
- Buff willow, has been boiled and then stripped. The tannin in the bark gives the orangey brown colour which is typically seen in baskets.
- White willow has been cut after Christmas, stood in 6 inches of water for 8/10 weeks so the sap rises and then stripped and used

for laundry baskets, cradles etc. where the white willow will not stain linen.

Willow can also be dyed, using white willow. After it has been stripped it is then dyed to produce an amazing array of colours. Coloured willow can be used to make craft pieces and add interest to baskets.

Dried willow needs to be soaked and mellowed, or rested and kept damp, before it is flexible enough to use. Willow with the bark left on needs more soaking than stripped willow, generally one day per foot, whereas stripped willow needs just a few hours.

Willow can also be used "green", when it has just been harvested and is still very pliable. Green willow is used for rustic projects, like willow balls for hanging in trees and freestanding sculptural forms, for example hens or deer for placing in the garden.

"Living willow" has been harvested and kept alive by keeping the butt ends in water. The butts can then be dug into soil to make a frame for tunnels or wigwams, to create a living structure in the garden.

If you want to start making at home, you will need some basic equipment. You will need a good pair of secateurs, a willow weaver's bodkin, and a soaking bag – unless you have a pond or long water trough.

Listed below are some willow suppliers in Somerset;
PH Coate and Son, Stoke St. Gregory, Taunton, TA3 6HY. Tel. 01823 490 249. www.coatesenglishwillow.co.uk Coates will deliver willow, or you can visit them and also have a look round their Willow and Wetland Visitor Centre, which has a trail round the willow beds, a museum and (importantly!) a tearoom. They also supply basic tools.

Another supplier is Musgrove Willow Ltd, Willow Fields, Lake Wall, Westonzoyland, Bridgewater, TA7 0LP. Tel. 01278 691105. www.musgrovewillows.co.uk They have a good range of organic dyed willow, useful for craft projects.

Or order willow on line from Somerset Willow Growers Ltd.

www.willowgrowers.co.uk

Tel. 01278 691 540

There are many books on willow work to inspire you with lots of ideas for projects. Coates Willow stock a range of books and books are reviewed and sometimes offered for sale through the Basketmakers' Association, details below. There are also lots of courses available to help you gain more skill. There are plenty of local makers in our area

and a good source of information on who is doing what, is the Basketmakers' Association; www.basketmakersassoc.org.uk general enquiries info@basketmakersassociation.org.uk They publish newsletters which give details on courses, list members and suppliers of willow materials and contain interesting articles on all things willow.

I run workshops from my home in Chedworth and also give talks and demonstrations to clubs and societies such as the W.I. and the Brownies. I make willow products for sale, for example tall plants supports and plant hoops for the garden which you can order directly from me.

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