

Willow weaving

Interested in willow – so am I. I have been for most of my life.

I first become aware of what a wonderfully versatile material willow is when interviewing a third generation basket maker in Southport for Merseyside Museums, where I was assistant keeper of social and industrial history. The basket maker described how baskets of all shapes and sizes were made to serve a variety of agricultural purposes, from harvesting potatoes to cockles. Before the arrival of plastics, willow had many uses in the home and workplace. All manner of goods; laundry baskets, cradles, prams, bath chairs, waste paper bins, letter trays, hampers and containers of all types were fashioned out of willow.

Later in my life, after retraining as a landscape architect, I began to appreciate how man working the land creates distinctive landscapes. The Somerset Levels have a unique character thanks to the working of the low lying land to grow willow, a crop that can withstand occasional flooding. The withy beds are a very special land use that can only survive while willow is in demand commercially.

It seemed an obvious continuation of my fascination with willow that I should teach this old and universal craft. Everywhere on earth, throughout history, wherever willow or other plants with flexible stems or grasses are grown, all cultures have woven baskets to meet their daily needs.

After joining the Basketmakers' Association I started to run a number of workshops for the Cotswolds Conservation Board and demonstrate willow weaving to local organisations like the W.I. and Brownies. A few years ago I started to run my own workshops from home, teaching others how to use this amazing plant to create structures in their garden and hopefully enthuse others to 'Get Weaving' for themselves.

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