

Natural, flexible and inexpensive, willow weaving is one of the oldest and most enduring of handicrafts, which has recently gained a new lease of life in sculptural work. From simple abstract shapes up to large animal figures, willow creations can be infinitely versatile and surprising durable. Willow can also be worked with as a living material 'in the green', to make living fences and garden dividers which continue to grow, or airy green arbours for agreeable shade in school grounds.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Art & design

KS1 – 1ab, 2abc, 3ab, 4abc, 5abcd

KS2 – 1abc, 2abc, 3ab, 4abc, 5abcd

KS3 – 1abc, 2abc, 3ab, 4abc, 5abcd

Design & Technology

KS1 – 1abcde, 2abcde, 3ab, 4ab, 5abc

KS2 – 1abcd, 2abcde, 3abc, 4ab, 5abc

KS3 – 1abcde, 2abcde, 3abc, 4abd, 7b

Science

KS1 – SC1, SC2, SC3

KS2 – SC1, SC2

KS3 – SC1, SC2

HOW TO CREATE a Willow Sculpture

The lifesize willow sculptures of woodland animals made by Beaconside Infants School, Penrith, were created in partnership with a local artist in willow, Phil Bradley, of Cockermouth, Cumbria. Children found it easy to work on the figures with Phil during his two-day residency at their school, and he observed that they grasped the concept of working in three dimensions better than many adults.

Unless you have the help of a willow expert you may not wish to launch into such ambitious projects, so your pupils could try their hand at making simple shapes in willow, like the small sphere illustrated overleaf, which can be made to any size and displayed to great effect outside, like abstract sculptures.

Before you start, investigate your local craft scene as there are now many short courses on willow weaving run by artists and small firms across the country. They often supply the withies (willow rods) and all the materials and equipment as well. They can also give you details of workers in willow who run workshops in local schools.

To make a willow sphere, you will need a sharp knife, secateurs, linseed oil, white spirit and a paint brush.

Start by forming the flat base on which it will stand. This needs to be strong, so experiment by making some practice bases in basketweave first. A simple alternative for beginners is to opt instead for a ready-made hardboard base with pre-drilled holes. These are the bases of many simple baskets, and can be bought from craft shops or from school art suppliers, or you could make your own from wood or plywood. The holes in ready-made bases will need to be enlarged as they are generally made for canes, which are thinner than withies.

Thread about 12 fine willow rods of 1m - 1.8m in length down through the holes in the base and up again. Bring them together over the top to form an arch. Twist them over each other repeatedly to link them. Do this until all the holes of the base are used and you have built up a spherical framework of vertical rods bent together

into the shape of a round domed roof.

Then weave in the rest of the rods horizontally and diagonally, one at a time, in and out of the vertical rods, in a random pattern, holding onto the thin end and tucking the thick end of each rod inside the sphere. Gradually build up successive layers of willow, curling the rods in and out of the shape until your spherical sculpture is complete.

When you have achieved the size and shape you want, trim off any stray ends of willow sticking out with a pair of secateurs. Brush the outside of the sculpture with a protective mixture of linseed oil and white spirit (3 parts linseed to 1 part spirit) to help weatherproof it.

Your pupils' woven sculptures can then be displayed outside, all together or in groups of different sizes, on the ground or on top of a wall for extra visual effect. To prevent them blowing away, tether them to something solid or put some pebbles or small rocks inside them to anchor them to the ground.

Living willow

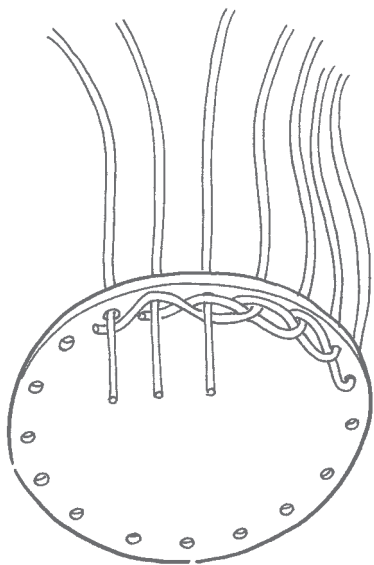
Willow's extraordinary tenacity also enables it to be used while a living material, planted in the ground and yet able to sprout afresh once woven. Beautiful green willow has a traditional association with undying love:

*"Make me a willow cabin at your gate,
And call upon my soul within the house.
Write loyal cantons of contemned love
And sing them loud, even in the dead of night;
Holla your name to the reverberate hills
And make the babbling gossip of the air
Cry out: Olivia!"*

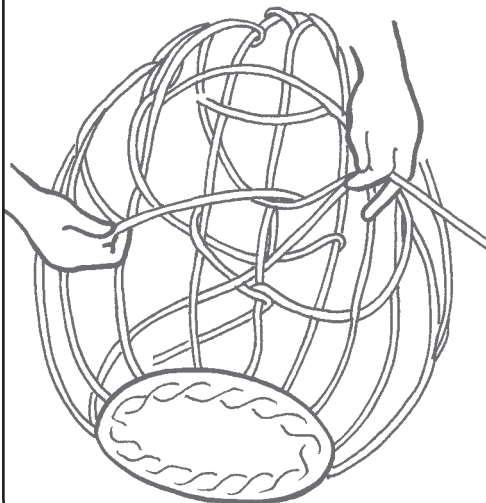
This is one of the most celebrated declarations of love from Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night'.

Your pupils too could make airy willow structures to shade themselves from the sun. Simply plant living willow and weave the withies into imaginative arbours which will grow green shoots every spring – creating a novel addition to any school grounds.

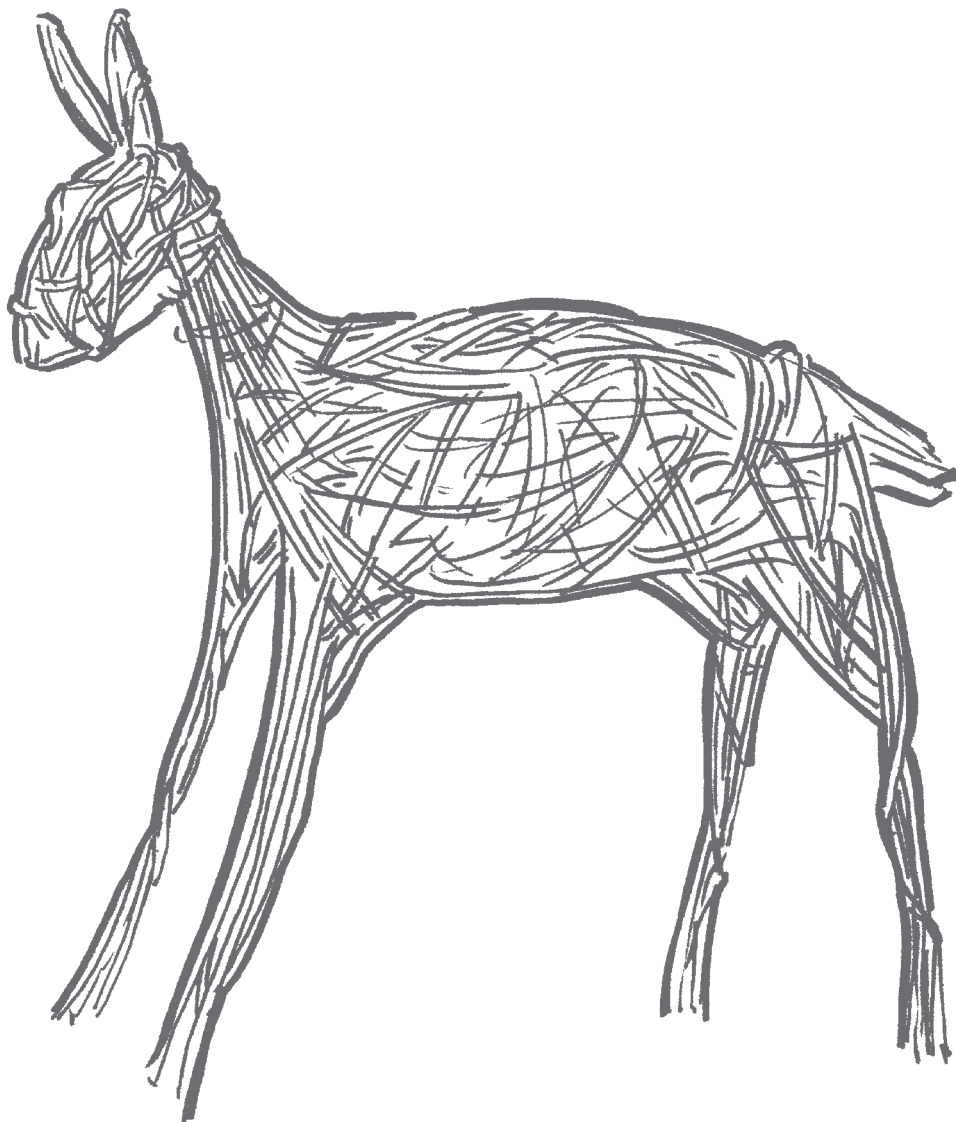
For a simple sphere, thread withies into a wooden base



Weave in all the willow



A lifesize willow sculpture



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For general information contact: **THE BASKETMAKERS' ASSOCIATION** www.basketassoc.org **PHIL BRADLEY** Basketmaker ☎ 01900 826413 **WILLOW POOL DESIGNS** ☎ 01539 567056 www.geocities.com/willowpool **WWW.BASKETMAKERS.COM**

For details of local suppliers and courses consult **YELLOW PAGES** online (www.yell.com)

For information on working with willow **LIVING WILLOW SCULPTURE** by Jon Warnes published by Search Press ISBN 0-855-32834-7