Climate School 180

Planting Willow

Introduction

There are about 300 species of willow worldwide with 19 different species being native to the UK. Therefore, if you want to use willow to create a structure in your school grounds it is important you plant the willow species. The species of willow that is most commonly used for building structures is *Salix viminalis*, known in the UK as Osier. It is also used for basket weaving, so is a useful plant to grow in school grounds.

This species of willow is an easy to grow, flexible plant that provides year-round interest in a school ground and has a variety of both environmental and educational benefits. Living Osier (often just referred to as living willow) can be manipulated into a variety of shapes to fulfil a variety of functions. For example, it can be used as a play feature, a source of shade or as a natural barrier to define different spaces. Cutting some of the excess growth each year provides a sustainable source of natural materials for other projects and encourages new growth.

There are also other reasons for planting willow including the benefits for wildlife – both as a food and a habitat. Different species also have a range of different coloured stems that can brighten up a winter landscape.





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The positive impact of Willow in relation to climate change

Provide shade, moderate temperature and help reduce wind speed.

Support a wealth of biodiversity.

Reduce the risk of water run-off and subsequent flooding.

Capture and store CO^2, one of the key greenhouse gases.

Improve air quality by capturing pollutants.

Making the change

- **Plan**

Available to purchase as single green rods during the harvesting season (annually from late November until mid-March), living willow can be planted directly into the ground or into containers.



When planning to plant a willow structure the following issues should be considered:

- **Location** – willow is a thirsty plant! It will grow best in soil that retains moisture and will require watering during prolonged dry spells whilst it establishes. Avoid planting willow too close to buildings or drains to reduce the likelihood of issues with the roots as it grows (the RHS recommend a distance of at least 10m).

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- **Function** – identify the reason for planting willow. Are you looking to create a structure for play (for example a dome or a teepee), to plant a fedge (a living fence that will help divide or define a space), an archway or simply plant a line of willow along a boundary as screening?

Living willow rods are supplied in different lengths and widths, not to mention species (many of which are native to the UK). Contact a local supplier to discuss your needs or purchase a readymade kit, which will come with instructions and rods cut to the correct length.



- **Prepare**

Gather the materials you need for planting and shaping your willow in advance.
These include:

- Living willow rods standing in a bucket of water.
- Secateurs or loppers to cut the end of each rod before planting.
- String or garden twine and a pair of scissors.
- A metal plant stake or metal digging bar with a point on one end. This will be used to make the holes in the soil to insert the willow rods.
- Extra soil may be useful to help fill in the holes once the willow rods are planted.
- Water and a watering can
- If you are planning to plant willow directly into the ground, identify an area of the grass which the mowers can easily avoid. If required, grass growth can be reduced whilst the willow is establishing by pinning down weed suppressant membrane and then piercing holes through the material to plant the willow rods in to.







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- **Plant**

Make holes in the ground that are between 15 and 20cms deep.

Cut the end from each willow rod at the thickest end before planting. Push the rods into the holes you have made.



Add extra soil over the planting hole to help fill in the gaps and tread the ground firmly around each rod to secure the rod in place.

Use the string or garden twine to tie rods together in the shape required.

Water once complete.

- **Protect**

If weed suppressant membrane has been used, you might like to consider adding wooden bark chippings over the top to hide the material and help keep everything in place.

Ensure that you have alerted the grounds maintenance team or the local authority about the presence of your willow planting to avoid damage through mowing, strimming or spraying.

Establish a watering rota with the pupils during periods of dry weather.

- **Management and maintenance**

Weave in the rods as they grow to encourage stability and maintain the shape of the structure you have planted.

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If you need to prune excessive growth, or you wish to harvest some of the willow, this should be undertaken when the growing season is over (so anytime from late November until mid-march once the leaves have fallen off). This is also the best time of year to plant any rods you have pruned e.g. to replace rods that have died or to create another area of willow.



If string or garden twine has been used, keep an eye on the knots and loosen them to avoid bark damage as the rods grow. Remove the string completely when the structure is sturdy enough to grow without additional support.

Useful resources and sources of more information

- Example supplier - Willow cuttings https://www.thewillowbank.com/
- The Royal Horticultural Society
  https://www.rhs.org.uk/garden-features/living-willow
- Learning through Landscapes
  Tool use and gardening / tree planting risk benefit assessment examples
  https://ltl.org.uk/understanding-risk/
- School Grounds Maintenance support (includes advice regarding willow)
  Polli:Nation maintenance guide| Learning through Landscapes (ltl.org.uk)

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