

Willow Weep for Me

You know that free association game where you're given a word, and you're supposed to say the first thing you think of? OK—here's your word—Willow. Well? Did you say aspirin? Basket weaving? *The Wind in the Willows*? Rooting hormone? Weeping willow? Wattle fence? Willow whistle? Or, like me, did your mind flash to *Salix*, which is the botanical name for willow? So, maybe you're not quite like me, but if you want to put up with me this month, we can take a walk among the willows and see what's growing.

The most famous willow around is the weeping willow, *Salix babylonica*. But I'm not going to recommend growing it unless you have a lot of land and a lot of water. The mature tree is enormous, the roots are invasive (as are most willow roots) and unless watered with some abandon, the dieback can be pitiful to see. I will admit that in the right spot, the weeping willow looks spectacular. (Maybe on the blue willow china pattern?)

There are many willows that can be cut for arrangements so let me just tell you about a few of them. *S. matusdana 'Tortuosa'* is the curly willow, and boy is it curly! All of the branches look like Shirley Temple's curls, just stretched out a bit. This can grow to be a 30' tree, but if you've driven past the fields along Santa Teresa, you can see another approach. If you cut the whole thing back, drastically, every few years, you can have enough material to cut, without having to fit a big tree in your yard.

S. integra 'Hakuro Nishiki' is a shrubby willow, rather than a tree, maybe reaching 6' tall. The stems on this willow are pink, and when the leaves first emerge, they are mottled green and white. But unlike some plants with temporary variegation that fade to all green, as the 'Hakuro Nishiki' leaves mature, they add the color pink to the green and white for a riot of color. This is another willow that benefits from regular severe pruning.

One final willow prized by arrangers is the fantail willow, *S. udensis 'Sekka'*. It can end up being a massive plant, at 15' tall and much wider. The fascination with this one is it's fasciation. The ends of the branches are flattened, often curled around and twisted. It can look a bit bizarre, but definitely adds a touch of the unusual to an arrangement. I think it is most interesting when it is dormant, and there are no leaves to hide the flat shape of the branches.

Next let me describe two prostrate willows with very different looks. *S. nakamurana v. yezoalpina* is the more robust of the two. The sturdy golden stems sport attractive catkins early in the spring, after which bright green furry leaves unfold. This willow is at its best climbing over and around rocks, it almost appears to flow over them like water. It can grow up to 1' tall and 10' wide in perhaps ten years.

S. repens 'Boyd's Pendula' is a very petite willow, suitable for bonsai and garden railroads as well as rock gardens. This willow has attractive, long-lasting catkins and tiny leaves. The branches grow almost completely prostrate, only occasionally throwing a branch up maybe 3-4" before it heads back down to the ground again.

One extremely attractive feature of many willows is the color of the stem. Besides your basic green (several shades), blue, purple & black, there are also willows with red stems, as well as yellow, gold and orange. The last willow I want to tell you about is one that used to grow in the drainage ditch along Watsonville Road near Hecker Pass Hwy. I don't know the botanical name for it, just that it was called an 'Italian Basket Willow' by an old-timer who lived near-by. This gentleman showed my dad how they used to cut a long, young stem from the willow shrub, then twist and fold the pliable stem around, and use it to tie the branch of a grapevine into place. (I assume they also used it for baskets!) That was an intriguing technique, but the reason I mention this particular willow here is the color of its stem. It is a vibrant yellow-gold color that almost seems to glow in the winter sun. I don't know why most of the plants were removed, but it used to be a particular delight of mine to see that glowing row of willows in the winter when all the leaves had fallen.

THIRTEEN OPEN GARDENS: Don't forget the 16th annual South County Garden Railroaders GARDEN LAYOUT TOUR benefiting local food banks, scheduled for June 26th from 9am to 4pm. Go to www.bagrs.org/FoodDrive for more information, or call Pat at (408) 846-8841.

~Nancy Schramm
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