

# Tree of the Month

## Willow

(Queen of the Waters)  
Month: 15/04 to 12/05



Crack Willow



White Willow



Goat Willow



The Willows in the woodland are mainly Crack (brittle twigs snap with an audible "Crack"), White (Cricket Bat), and Goat (Pussy) Willows. A few Devils Claw (Corkscrew) Willows have been kindly donated. They are man-made ornamental hybrids (like the Weeping Willow) that do not grow as tall or live as long as the other willows (about 10m tall and up to 50 years). All willows are fond of water and are usually found near streams or in damp areas.

The White and Crack Willow are similar and hard to tell apart. They both grow to about 25m tall, with a spread of about 10m, and can live up to 400 years. The Cracks bark is rougher and darker than the White. Their leaves are long, slender ovals. The Cracks are dark green on top but lighter underneath. The White has slightly longer, lighter, leaves which have fine downy hairs on the underside. Both have catkins that grow from silky buds, with the male (yellow) and female (green) on different trees that usually appear before the leaves. After pollination by insects the female catkins turn into woolly white seed capsules that are dispersed by the wind.

Goat Willow can grow to about 15m tall and live for about 200 years with a smooth grey-brown bark. Its leaves are a broad oval with a twisted point, green on top and covered with a fine down underneath. The large buds burst open before the leaves to reveal silky globe-like catkins that are silver at first but soon turn a golden yellow (the Pussies). They are very tactile.

Willow bark and leaves contain salicylic acid, a good pain killer and the source of aspirin. Gypsies used a bitter drink made from willow bark as a tonic to ease rheumatism, influenza and headaches and as a cure for chronic diarrhoea (not recommended!). Water collected from a slit in the bark of a willow was said to be good for easing dimness and soreness of the eyes and for clearing spots from the skin.

Few willows are allowed to reach their full height as many are coppiced (cut off at ground level) or pollarded (cut off at head height) to produce long, straight, pliable shoots, used for weaving baskets and hats, making hurdles (sheep-proof fences) and chairs, building coracles, etc. These branches can be planted direct into the ground to make "living" shelters, tunnels, and hedges. The strong, supple wood was also used to make fast sailing boats and for the bottoms of quarry carts.

In folk lore the willow with its drooping branches was often used as a symbol for sorrow. However, with its association with moon goddesses, it was considered to be a potent love symbol used by the gypsies to divine future husbands, and an inspiration to poets who used to gather in sacred willow groves and carry willow boughs.

Wishes may be granted by the willow tree if they are asked for in the correct manner. Form your wish and explain to the tree what it is and why you desire it. Select a pliable shoot and, without breaking it from the tree, tie a loose knot in it while expressing your wish. Thank the tree before leaving. When your wish is granted, return to the willow, untie the knot and thank the tree for its aid. Good luck!