

# Playful springboards: WILLOW

## Facts and Folklore

The use of willow bark dates back thousands of years, to the time of Hippocrates (400 BC) when patients were advised to chew on the bark to reduce fever and inflammation. The pain-relieving property in the willow bark is called salicin, a chemical that is similar to aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid). In the 1800s, salicin was used to develop aspirin.

It was told that it was bad luck to tell a secret while standing under a willow, as the wind that blows through the leaves will reveal the secret to everyone. Throughout the ages, people have been entranced by the willow tree and they appear in the ancient legends, tales, folklore and customs of different cultures.

They feature in three of William Shakespeare's plays:

Hamlet, Othello and Twelfth Night.

The willow tree is flexible and resilient and has healing properties.

When willow trees are cut back to ground level they will very quickly grow back numerous new rods – this is known as coppicing and is a traditional way to provide a ready source of timber.

Willow bark contains natural plant growth hormones which can be used for rooting new cuttings. Gardeners, who are taking cuttings from to try and propagate them can make willow water to help their cuttings to take root.

To do this collect young first year willow twigs, removing all foliage and chopping up and boiling them in a pan. Once cooled overnight, this water can be sieved and put in a secure container in a cool place (make sure to label it!). It can then be used to soak cuttings from plants before planting them on and the propagated plants can be watered with the willow water.

Living fences: As the willow is such a resilient plant, it can also be used to make fences that will take root and grow, with new growth being woven back in to strengthen the 'living' fence.

## practical uses

Willow is a commonly used material in art and craft projects; its flexible twigs make it perfect for creating weaved object such as baskets, containers and fence panels. The wood of willow trees is often used in sculpture and if 'live' twigs are used (in other words, green cuttings), the sculptures can grow and come alive!

For inspirational ideas, search online for 'willow sculptures' or visit [www.annaandthewillow.co.uk](http://www.annaandthewillow.co.uk)



Carolyn Bell, Source: facebook.com/annaandthewillow

Pappus



## WREATH

Willow bound or woven together makes an ideal base for a decorative wreath. Scavenge for seasonal natural objects (it doesn't have to just be at Christmas!) and weave them into the base. Similarly, willow can be used to 'weave' a bird's nest structure that can be lined with moss and used to display interesting natural objects.

## Working with Willow

### WHAT KIND OF WILLOW?

Willow for projects can be cheaply purchased, but why not go out and forage for your own willow twigs? They are very easy to identify - use the *Pappus* Willow ID sheets to help.

There are many varieties of willow and some snap more easily than others. If you plan to make 'living' willow sculptures, soak the twigs (called 'withies') overnight in a bath beforehand to ensure they are suitably flexible.

Willow can then be used to create simple structures and shapes - see the next pages for project ideas.

Plait willow by securing one end of the withes with string or masking tape and twisting the pieces of willow together. Secure the other end and allow the plait to dry out.



### WILLOW SPHERE

A willow sphere can be the launch point for many creative ideas.

First make a circle of willow by weaving two pieces of willow together and taping or folding the ends inside. Make two or three more circles of similar dimensions and slot them inside one other to create the sphere shape. Secure the circles with wire or twine.

You can also add strength to any structure by weaving willow in and out of whatever basic shape you have, for example a pair of fairy wings or a fish shape.

Search online for 'willow weaving' or 'willow projects'





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## MASKS

### Equipment:

Elastic, willow withies, masking tape, paint and other decoration, tissue paper, PVA glue

### Instructions:

Sketch out mask ideas – you might like to give children a theme to work with. Using withies and masking tape, create a frame for the mask and be wild with your ideas – willow can be used to create long necks, large heads, big ears or any other exaggerated feature. Cover the structure with tissue paper and glue, adding colour and eyes, hair etc where needed.

Masks are great fun and allow children to invent new characters, or to adopt characters with strong cultural and historical links. The role of the mask is to transform the wearer – creating an opportunity to connect with the natural world and step out of our human constraints – a springboard to drama and role play. Masks can be very simple but working with willow gives the opportunity to create more sophisticated three-dimensional structures.

## Natural materials mobile

Collect interesting natural objects from your area. Make a willow frame for your mobile – perhaps a cross shape or a hoop. Using twine or string, attach the natural objects to the frame, allowing each to hang at a different level so that all can be seen.

## Adding paper to a willow frame

Add a decorative layer to a simple mobile structure or to the lanterns (see left). To do this, spread a watered-down mixture of PVA glue on to a flat surface that has been protected with a piece of plastic. Carefully lay the tissue paper on to the glue mixture. Take care, as if the tissue gets too wet it will tear. Take a sponge soaked in the glue mixture and wipe it over the tissue then fold the tissue in half and wipe again. Lay this tissue on your shape or lantern, overlapping the willow structure. Continue doing this, adding layers of tissue until the whole shape is covered – but – don't add too much or you'll lose the effect of light coming through.

At this stage, add paint, glitter, eyes or anything else to decorate.

Leave to dry.

## Creative Ideas

## LANTERNS

The method for creating a lantern is similar to the technique described above but the structure needs to be three dimensional. A straight sided shape is often easiest, e.g. a square or triangle. Be sure to add a source of light to the bottom face of the lantern by adding a small jar with a battery-operated tealight – wire it to the base of the lantern so that it doesn't move.

Once the light is in, add the tissue paper to the lantern. Allow it to dry and then attach wire to the top and perhaps a stick to hold the lantern. Finally cut a small hole in the base of the lantern, under the battery operated tealight, to access the on / off switch.

Many lanterns look very effective in a massed lantern parade.





## Creative Ideas



### ROUNDERS BAT

This is a slightly larger whittling project and requires larger, sharper tools so adult supervision is required. Take a thick willow branch, approximately 20-25cms long. A rounders bat is thicker at the 'playing' end than the 'holding' end, so decide which end the handle will be fashioned from. Remove the bark and use the tools to carefully cut and carve the willow into a long, smooth bat shape. Use rough sandpaper to tidy its surface. Add twine or tape around the handle to make it more comfortable to play games with.

### CHOOSING RHYME

In Slovakia, children use a common 'choosing rhyme' to decide who will be "it" while playing tag. Vřba means WILLOW in Slovakian.

#### Choosing Rhyme:

1.Stojí vřba pri potoku  
Na nej visí zvon  
Na koho to slovo padne  
Ten musí ísť von 2.Pri potoku vřba stala,  
do vody sa pozerala.  
Pod vřbou sa koza pásala,  
zavše sa jej brada triasla.  
A tá koza zvonček mala,  
zrazu na ňom zacengala  
cingi – lingi – bom!  
A ty pôjdeš von!

### Translation to English

There is a willow by the stream  
A bell hangs on it  
To whom will the word fall  
has to go out  
There is a willow tree by the stream,  
that looked into the water.  
The goat grazed under the willow,  
its chin shook.  
And the goat had a bell,  
all of a sudden he started on it:  
cingi - lingi - bom!  
and out go you





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## FICTIONAL WILLOW

One of the most famous willows is a star of Harry Potter books – the Whomping Willow, a species of willow that has magical properties and grows in the grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Find out more about the Whomping Willow by searching for it online – there is much ‘mythology’ available for it, to inspire children’s own play or stories



## Games



## WHOMPING WILLOW GAME

This is a version of the ‘rock, paper, scissors’ game.

To be a Willow: quickly raise your arms up above your head and stand tall.

To be a Student: crouch down as if to run or roll away.

To be a Wizard: lunge forward as if pointing a wand.

Students beat Professors as they can roll away from their magic spells.

Professors beat the Willow as their magic is more powerful.

Willow beats the Students as it can attack and fling them away through the air.

Players face each other and on the count of three adopt their pose simultaneously.

The winner gains a point. If they adopt the same then neither wins a point.

## WILLOW BASES

Many children’s games use ‘bases’ – capture the flag, tag etc.

Big willow hoops make great portable bases.

As an example, try Tag In The Hoop: in a large area, place lots of willow hoops, which are safe bases for a game of tag. 3 or 4 players who are ‘it’ have to try to tag the remaining players, who cannot be caught if they are inside one of the willow safe bases. However, willow bases are only safe for up to 10 counts – then the player has to leave. Once they are caught, they can either sit out or join the catchers.

Remove safe bases as the game progresses to make it harder.

