



# Willow talk

With plastic no longer fantastic, willow's attractive appearance and green credentials are turning many more of us into basket cases

WRITTEN BY ROSIE NICKERSON

**W**illow is the ultimate green product. Renewable, sustainable, with a negative carbon footprint, there is no more eco-friendly crop than willow. Withy beds, as they are known in Somerset, have been grown commercially on the Somerset Levels and Moors since the 1850s. By 1930, some 3,000 acres were in production but there are only 300 acres left today. Willow is grown more widely in the UK for other purposes, such as cricket bats and for biomass, but commercial willow growing for basket weaving is almost exclusively in Somerset.

Mankind has been using willow wicker for centuries. Herodotus, in the fifth century BC, clearly describes a coracle made of willow. Romans apparently sat in willow armchairs. Fishermen have been using willow baskets for lobster, eel and salmon for thousands of years. Pre-1950s, when plastic was invented, willow wickerwork was in use in most homes for everyday items such as cribs, bread baskets, laundry baskets and shopping baskets; outside the home it was used for postal delivery baskets, butcher and baker's delivery baskets. Victorians adored their wicker furniture and during the Industrial Revolution, commercial boilers

were invented, allowing the large-scale production of willow rods for basket weaving. Previously, this was only possible during a two-month period when the sap rises, in May to June, when the willow rods could be stripped, work that was traditionally done by women and children.

During the Second World War, Somerset willow was vitally important. It was used to make protective cases for transporting artillery shells and also for pigeon baskets; some 22,000 pigeons were in service to relay vital war communications. It was also used for panniers of airborne supplies of ammunition and food. Even today, no other material has been found to replace willow wicker balloon baskets, which have specific qualities and absorb impact on landing. Willow wicker pops up in all sorts of unexpected places; who knew that underneath the →

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traditional bearskin 'caps' worn by Palace guards is a Somerset willow frame? Willow is also much in use for thatching and as living willow for 'spiling' the sides of riverbanks to control erosion. Aspirin, derived from willow, was the earliest of painkillers.

#### DEATH BY PLASTIC

With the invention of plastics during the 1950s, almost overnight the market for willow died. A few farms carried on the tradition and with the current mood highlighting the perils of plastic, there is a definite move to return to more eco-friendly products. There is a renewed enthusiasm for traditionally woven willow products. Weaving courses nationwide are selling out so fast it's tough to find one with spaces still available this summer. For the cost of a log basket, you can learn to make your own and take it away with you at the end of the day. The availability of these courses is spawning a whole new generation of hobby basket weavers. As well as baskets, you can learn how to weave garden statuary, such as a giant birds, a deer or a prancing hare; construct living willow dens and tunnels; or, though it may sound a tad ghoulish, there is also a course for weaving your own or a loved one's coffin.

“Once planted, a withy bed can last for well over 30 years”

A family-run business founded in 1928, today it is run by Michael Musgrove, a third-generation willow grower, who joined his father in the business when aged just 16. His wife, Ellen, is co-director and their son, Jack, now 27, joined aged 18 and is the fourth generation to work in the business. They grow some 60 varieties of willow on 100 acres. Business is expanding fast and to cope with this upsurge in demand, they have recently

Musgrove Willows in Westonzoyland, Somerset, supplies basket weavers nationwide as well as educational establishments, the National Trust and the RSBP. I am told that willow bundles from last year's crop (2017-18) have completely sold out and, as they are between seasons, they are waiting for this year's crops to dry and have waiting lists for certain varieties of their willow rods.

**Above: adding a handle to a coffin, one of Musgrove Willows' fastest-selling products. Above right: after harvesting, rods are dried for six to eight weeks**

acquired another 10 acres of land to grow more willow. During my visit in late April last year, I was able to watch a virgin field being turned into a withy bed.

Traditionally, planting willow was always done by hand, although this task is becoming increasingly mechanised. Recently, Musgrove Willows had an agricultural planting machine modified to specific requirements so it could be used to plant willow rods. Ten inches of willow rod – or 'setts', as they are known – are pushed six inches into the ground. These magically establish themselves and within three years each 'stool' is capable of producing 30 to 40 'wands' for harvesting. Once planted, a withy bed can last for well over 30 years; if it is well maintained, it will go on for a century. It's still a very slow process, however, and the planting machine itself is unique and reminded me of the old-fashioned potato-planters, with four men on the back.

One acre of land to be planted requires some 17,000 willow setts. The growing wands soon outgrow the weeds, but



the young shoots are susceptible to frost damage. Any early growth is removed either by allowing sheep or cattle to graze in the withy beds or using a trimming machine to cut it off. During the growing season from May to September, they can reach 8ft tall. No soil cultivation once established makes willow farming ideally suited for those looking to biodiversity. It is one of the only crops that

**Below: once the willow rods have been cut the plant is left to grow on. Below right: a completed coffin – families often come to help with the weaving**

is harvested in January and February as the wands have to be dormant at the point of harvest, which, again, was traditionally done by hand. Nowadays the willow is harvested by a small harvester on caterpillar wheels as the fields are often wet and marshy.

The willow rods are dried outside for six to eight weeks from March to May and, when fully dry, are then brought inside for grading into lengths and storing, but only when the rods are completely 'rizzled' (wrinkled). It will then be boiled in the enormous tank

hours, then the bark is removed by machine for buff willow or the wands are re-soaked and left with the bark still on.

Cultivating willow is a labour-intensive industry. Each willow rod will have been handled 20 times or more before it reaches the end user – and that's just the rods, before they have been woven into anything.

One of the fastest-selling products for Musgrove Willows is its willow coffins. The company's eight coffin-makers produce around 20 to 30 per week. I was interested to see these, never having seen one before. →



I found them to be truly beautiful creations. I was impressed by the quality of the workmanship, the intricate designs and the gorgeous country greens, muted shades of blue and natural wicker. To me, they have far more appeal than the traditional mahogany version, evoking instead sun-filled images of picnic hampers and ballooning baskets, rather than death and grief. The coffins were in various stages of development, the long willow rods towered high above the weavers' heads. It was fast work and it was beautiful; neat, tight-twisting weaving. The weavers made it look easy but it's highly skilled work and can take years to master. The willow can be dyed in almost any colour. Musgrove Willows was recently commissioned to make a purple one and has also been called upon to make bespoke examples, such as boat-shaped coffins.

## “ The company's eight coffin makers produce 20 to 30 per week ”

Ellen Musgrove tells me: “We invite family members to come and help weave, there's a period of time between a death and the funeral and some relatives want to be physically involved in doing something practical. We invite whole families to come and assist; they bring children, too.”

Another major willow farm on the Somerset Levels is Coates English Willow, along with the Willow and Wetlands Visitor Centre. It dates from 1819 and is still run by the Coate family today. They farm 90 acres of willow beds and welcome 20,000 visitors per year. They offer guided tours, have a museum, gift shop and employ eight basket weavers. They supply the high-end luxury hampers to Fortnum & Mason and were commissioned by the London Olympics to create a unique set of jumps for the cross-country: a chess set and board as well as a basket of cricket balls. They also work with film producers and supplied the majority of the willow for the famous Willow Man landmark on the M5.

Their biggest-selling product is charcoal, and they produce 90% of the world's willow charcoal; roughly half of their 90 acres will be used to produce it. The process itself uses only the best willow wands, certainly not the off-cuts from the basket-weaving side of the business, which is what I'd imagined. Consistency is key and each piece of charcoal has to look exactly like the last. It's a three-day process to make charcoal and the



**Top: weaving willow is a skilled craft requiring many years of practice. Above: traditionally, willow was planted by hand but Musgrove Willows has had an agricultural planting machine modified to speed this up**

willow rods are cooked slowly without oxygen so they do not burn or turn to ash.

Nicola is married to Jonathan Coate, the seventh generation of the Coate family to farm willow. They are both co-directors and Jonathan is a skilled basket weaver, although he rarely gets the time to exercise his skill as he's so busy running the business side of the farm. She explains why she thinks willow is enjoying such a revival: “There's such a backlash against plastics and willow looks lovely pretty well anywhere. Recently there has been a noticeable growth in the appreciation of crafts, of having something of high quality. Roughly 75% of our visitors who go on the guided tour will buy something from the gift shop, mostly people buy traditional shopping baskets. This is because they have come to understand exactly what is involved.”

Nicola tells me the farm is approximately 325 acres and they have a Natural England Higher Level Stewardship agreement in place. All the willow is grown on land designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. They have 110 beef cattle, which graze the willow beds in the spring eating the early growth of leaves; this reduces the need for mechanised control of weeds. All in all, their farm showcases a wonderful return to traditional farming methods.

So, if you want a truly eco-friendly product with a negative carbon footprint, look no further than willow. Forget the ‘bag for life’ and go one further: learn to weave your own shopping basket, which will certainly last a lifetime – and maybe even longer. ■

[www.musgrovewillows.co.uk](http://www.musgrovewillows.co.uk)

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