

The Willow!

The Willow is a huge collection of over 300 species of fast growing shrubs and trees. They come in the form of tiny creeping alpine plants that grow at high altitude ranging all the way through to large lowland trees and can grow up to 80ft (25m) or so.

Most Willows tend to favour damp soil - the waterlogged and the water's edge, often found by rivers, ponds and streams, as well as lakes, wet areas and fenland. The bigger trees such as the White Willow and Crack Willow tend to have a grey-brown bark lined with fissures and nobbles. They are deciduous and have long thin green leaves that hang down like fingers and flutter and sway on the breeze or seem to dance with the flow of the stronger winds.

The White Willow unlike some of the other trees tends to have a covering of silky white hairs and the leaves take on a grey - white, silvery tint to their appearance. They are male or female Trees with the male catkins up to 2 inches (5cm) long with yellow anthers, while the female ones are green. The fruit comes in the form of a green pod with white haired seeds.

The Goat Willow or Pussy Palm on the other hand is different. It is a smaller tree and although it has a similar bark, it tends to be smoother and its leaves are shorter and more rounded. Their male catkins tend to appear earlier than the other species and turn a bright yellow by March when they are ripe with pollen. Once the female catkins are fertilised they eventually break up into tiny fluffy seeds which are then scattered on the seasonal drifting breezes.

The Willow Tree has long been revered as a medicinal tree throughout the ages and was used as a relief from the aches and pains associated with the suffering as a result of the damp and cold. Within its chemical make-up it has been found to contain a natural anti-inflammatory and is a key ingredient in aspirin.

The Willow has also been a source of leaf feed for domesticated livestock and can be used as either fresh or dried for winter feeding.

The Tree copes well with cutting and grows new shoots vigorously, growing strong and flexible new straight branches, which have been used throughout history for a multitude of things from woven fences to baskets and an infinite number of other uses and woven designs!

Throughout the ages, The Willow has been celebrated by many cultures as a connection with water and the Goddess of the Moon. The two connected with the time of Imbolc and the celebration of emotion through poetry and music.

The Willow tree is also known as the Tree of immortality, for its ability to grow and take root from the smallest branch falling or pushed into the Earth with the unusual capability of being able to grow from either end and are often planted along river banks to help prevent their erosion.

The Great Willow Groves were thought to be magical with their connection to the water and the feminine energy and thought to bring enlightenment through intuition, divination and healing.

In Irish legend, it was said that the Bards and Poets saw the Willow as sacred and used its wood in the making of their harps, used to accompany the oral traditions of remembering the memory of the Ancestors and life's history - the spun threads of the spiritual and the beauty of the melody of life.

The Weeping Willow was introduced looking back in history from Asia for its beauty and elegance but because of the difference in the weather, it can only produce female flowers in Britain and so it cannot reproduce!

Since ancient times, the Willow has been managed and pollarded for the young straight flexible growth and its use for weaving, renewing new life and vitality to the tree and keeping its health through the ages!

Within the Grove of the Sunwheel, we honour the Willow as part of our Ceremony of Imbolc and celebrate the Awakening and the melting of the winter freeze with a gathering of personal connection with the music and the melody of new life and the release of emotion through poetic expression and the chance to bathe the spirit in the waters of cleansing and the toasting of health with the drink of the elemental waters of the Spring of life!

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