



willow huts

# Living Willow Huts

by Rusty Keeler

Children and Nature. Every day we work hard to bring the life-enriching properties of nature to young children for play and learning. The sunflower houses planted and arranged last year were magical: the plants grew to create a living “room” for children that changed with the seasons. Ready to take the next step? Try planting a Living Willow Hut — the ultimate

shapes that will sprout and grow over time. People have been creating similar living architecture throughout the world for centuries in the forms of living fences, gazebos, and garden sculpture. Now folks are planting living willow in children’s environments that grow into tunnels, domes, playhouses, and huts. You can plant them too.

areas. *Salix viminalis* is one variety often recommended. Many kinds of plants and small trees can be used to create living architecture, but if you are a beginner using willow is a good way to start. It’s easy to grow and forgiving! You don’t need roots to transplant willow; simply take cuttings of the whips/branches in very early spring and plop them in the ground. After a bit of time and plenty of watering your plants will begin to sprout roots and leaves on their own! Amazing. Need to find out where you can find the best willow? Contact local plant people, nurseries, or cooperative extensions in your area for advice.

The Living Willow Hut project you see here is at the Syracuse University Education and Childcare Center in Syracuse, New York. The willow hut was the



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hidey nook and my personal favorite natural playscape element!

Living Willow Huts are inexpensive to make, fun to plant, easy to grow, and make beautiful spaces for children. They involve planting dormant willow shoots in the ground and weaving them into

Have you heard of a weeping willow tree? The willow most widely used for willow structures is in the same family as the weeping willow tree but grows more shrub-like by the sides of rivers and wet





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finale of a year-long Arts-in-Education grant that my wife and I were fortunate to be a part of with staff and preschoolers. The subject of the project was “Water and Habitat.” As the year progressed, the children’s imaginations and artistic creations began focusing on the life and habitat of beavers, so we all decided to construct a child-sized beaver lodge in their outdoor classroom. The center contacted the University’s forestry department who gladly helped us obtain our building material of choice: living willow.

Over a rainy weekend in early spring a group of parent and staff volunteers gathered to plant the willow in the ground. Supplies included piles of living willow shoots and non-living willow shoots, and string for lashing. We started by marking the ground where the willow hut would go. We then planted a looping network of the larger, non-living willow pieces in the general shape of our hut and tunnel. This would give us a strong frame on which to lash the living willow.

When picking the height of the tunnel and lodge we had to remember that it should be child-sized and cozy, but with enough room for adults to climb inside, too. We poked 2” diameter holes 12” deep in the ground with a sturdy iron prybar. We cut 1” off the end of each living willow shoot to leave a clean end to plant, stuffed them into the holes, patted them firmly in the ground, and lashed them

together. We had fun layering and looping the branches to form an organically flowing shape. It looked like it grew there on its own!

The non-living willow becomes an attractive structure that is great fun to play in; but the real magic happens when the willow begins to green up and branch out. Wow! Within the very first year this hut was growing new shoots and leaves. Now, years later, the staff simply weaves the new shoots back into the structure for a thicker canopy of green. The hut itself becomes a renewable resource of willow shoots to be planted in other areas of the yard or shared with other local centers.

Ready to build a living willow hut? Your children will love it. Now is the perfect time to start planning — and helping other groups to plan, too. When you find out where to obtain willow or similar plants, share the info with other interested centers. When you build, invite folks to help you. Join the Earth-Play Network ([www.earthplay.net](http://www.earthplay.net)) and share pictures and stories with people all over the world. Ready to keep the movement going? After your willow hut gets established you could even start a “willow collective” in your community to help folks build their own willow structures — with cuttings from your own willow hut!

Ah, willow huts . . .



Rusty Keeler works worldwide helping folks build beautiful natural playscapes for children. Visit his web site at [www.earthplay.net](http://www.earthplay.net).

Rusty is currently looking for questions about natural playscapes for a Q&A article next year. E-mail your questions to him at [Rusty@earthplay.net](mailto:Rusty@earthplay.net).

Rusty is married to artist Annemarie Zwack. You’ll like her stuff, too. Visit her web site at [www.zwackart.com](http://www.zwackart.com). Be sure to check out her new children’s book, *Color Me Earth*.