

Living Willow Huts - Part 2

Constructing a living willow hut

by Rusty Keeler



willow huts

Since writing my article last year on living willow huts many people have contacted me with questions, suggestions, and pictures of their own willow hut creations. Because willow structures are so much fun for children and so many people have asked me how to build them, I decided that this issue's article should be a step-by-step "how-to" guide on the basics of living willow hut construction. Now is the perfect time to start planning your project, because the best time to plant living willow is in the dormant season — before new leaves start to sprout.

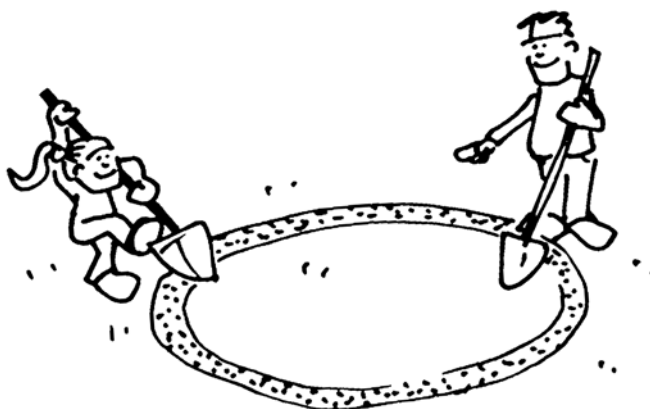
While there certainly are time-tested techniques for building willow structures, the best advice I have is to experiment. I've seen yards in Europe hosting neat and proper willow tunnels with delicate curving lines and measured archway weavings. But I've also seen rowdy adventure playgrounds where kids over the years have haphazardly planted willow here and there and tied pieces together to form sculpture and houses with great success. Willow is vigorous growing and forgiving of tough treatment, so feel free to plant wildly and learn from your successes and mistakes.

While almost any type of willow can be used for your project, varieties of *salix viminalis* are ideal because this species produces long straight rods that can be easily woven together. Near my home in upstate New York I've found this type of willow growing wild beside creeks and rivers. Ask your local cooperative extension about likely places to find willow or good potential substitutes.

Remember: the project shown here is only a basic example of what a willow hut could look like. Your willow hut could be a totally different shape or size. You may even want to try making a living tunnel or fence. Think of these steps as an introduction to the basics of

Materials you will need:

- Living willow rods or shoots — These do not need roots and can simply be snipped from a larger living plant. They should be 3' to 6' long, and can be up to the size of your thumb in thickness (although smaller shoots have better success at growing). Gather 10-50 shoots, depending on the size of your project. Store them in a bucket of water until you are ready to plant them.
- Non-living willow or flexible branches of another plant — to use as the initial structural frame.
- Flexible string or cord — to tie the willow shoots together.



- ① PICK A SUNNY SPOT. MOIST SOIL IS BEST.
(BUT WILLOW IS HARDY & TOLERANT OF ALL CONDITIONS)
- ② MARK OUT SIZE & SHAPE FOR DOME.
(A 6' DIAMETER CIRCLE IS NICE)
- ③ REMOVE TURF WHERE YOU WANT TO PLANT



- ④ POKE HOLES IN THE GROUND 4-6" DEEP
— USE A CROWBAR OR PRY BAR —
DON'T FORGET THE DOORS!
(SPACE HOLES 8"-12" APART)

living willow construction, and let your imagination decide what your wild green creation will look like. When you are dreaming, some things to consider are:

- imagining how children will use the structure
- how many children you would like to play inside at one time
- how to best orient the doorway for easy supervision by adults.

After a number of years, you can use your hut as a willow shoot making machine and sustainably harvest shoots to build new willow structures on your playscape or to share with friends! Don't forget: experiment, experiment, experiment. Try new shapes and creations. Have fun. Learn from your mistakes. Take pictures and share them with the EarthPlay Network www.earthplay.net.

Suggested reading

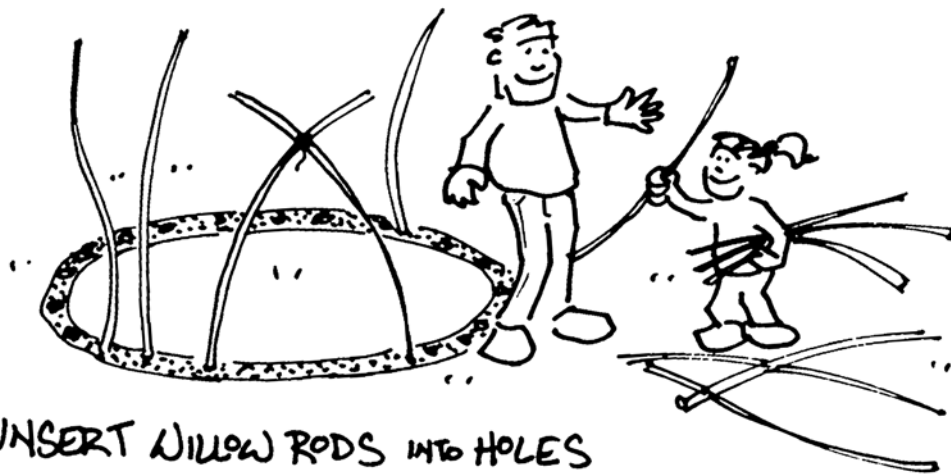
Warnes, J. (2000). *Living willow sculpture*. Search Press.



Rusty Keeler designs places for children to play and lives in the woods of upstate New York. This article is a sneak preview of a "how-to" project from his upcoming book about Natural Playscapes. www.earthplay.net

Tools you will need:

Tape measure; shovels; spades; prybar/crowbar or rebar; pruning equipment such as clippers, loppers, pruners, hedge shears, hand saws, scissors, and a sharp knife; a hose for watering; plus work gloves and eye protection for safety.



⑤ INSERT WILLOW RODS INTO HOLES

* ALMOST ANY TYPE OF WILLOW CAN BE USED, ALTHOUGH VARIETIES OF SALIX VIMINALIS ARE IDEAL BECAUSE THIS SPECIES PRODUCES LONG STRAIGHT RODS.

* ALWAYS PLANT IN WINTER (OCTOBER-APRIL)



⑥ TIE WILLOW RODS TOGETHER. WEAVE THEM INTO DIFFERENT PATTERNS FOR STRENGTH — EVEN HORIZONTALLY.

⑦ WATER REGULARLY THE FIRST SUMMER WILLOW SHOULD BEGIN SPROUTING LEAVES IN LATE SPRING.



⑧ AS WILLOW GROWS, CONTINUE TO WEAVE NEW GROWTH INTO STRUCTURE. TRIM ANY BRANCH PROTRUDING AT EYE LEVEL