

Useful tips for planting living willow structures

Siting the structure

Plant your willow in an area that is open to sunlight and where it will not have to compete with other plants. It grows best where it has plenty of light and is not overshadowed.

Some useful terms

Willow lengths are referred to as *rods*, *whips* or *withies*. *The butt* is the thick, cut end of the willow lengths. In JPR's willow sculpture kits, *uprights* are the long rods used to create the main shape and *diagonals* are for cross weaving along the sides of the structure.

Equipment needed

Garden string, secateurs, spade and tape measure. If you do not have a willow sculpture kit, you may also need groundcover and tying material. A spike to make holes into the ground and safety goggles to protect from whippy willow rods can also be useful. You may need some peat free compost if the ground is particularly poor or stony.

Best time to plant

The best time to plant living willow is during the winter from December until the end of March. It is not advisable to plant if there is frost on the ground.

Preparation

For best results, dig a trench both 30-45cm wide and deep where you are planning to plant the willow rods. Mix the excavated soil with compost and tip back into the trench.

If necessary, cut the butts at an angle to make pushing them into the ground easier. They will need to be planted 30 to 45cm deep.

When measuring out the shape of the structure and planting distances between rods, it can be useful to use a measuring stick. Use a piece of string tied to a stick to draw out the circular shape of domes and igloos. Cut the holes in the weed-suppressant matting just big enough to fit in the willow rods – if the holes are too big, weeds will grow through.

Weaving willow

It is important not to kink the rods too much as you weave them, as this can cause the rods to die off above the kink. Instead, bend them in gentle curves or weave the butts in first, before pushing them in to plant. Sometimes tight turns are required and it can be very difficult to bend the willow without it kinking or splitting. If the willow does not bend in a neat curve, make several small kinks close together to reduce the risk of splitting the rods.

You may need to tie the tips of some weaving rods to help keep them in place. Tying together rods where they cross each other low down near the ground can help to add strength to the structure and keep the weave in position.

Planting the weave at a low angle to the ground encourages growth down the entire length of the willow rather than just at the top. Eventually, this helps to create a more solid-looking structure.

After care

Once finished, water well, stand back, admire and wait to grow! Keep the area well watered for the first growing season, especially for the first 2 months. The willow should not need watering in subsequent years.

The willow varieties used for living sculptures tend to grow quite vigorously. Depending on the desired appearance, new growth can either be woven back into the structure to keep the shape or cut back. Although willow can withstand severe pruning, any cutting should be done in the winter when the willow is not in leaf – this is particularly important for the first cut back.

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