



# Willow

Willow is the common name for the *Salix* genus, which contains some 400 species of deciduous trees and shrubs found primarily on moist soils in cold and temperate regions across the Northern Hemisphere. They're characterized by their long slender branches, tough roots, bark that is charged with salicylic acid, flowers that cluster into unique formations referred to as catkins, and seeds with long silky hairs.



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CLASSICAL  
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## Cultivation History + Common Uses

Willow trees are primarily propagated from cuttings, and are most commonly cultivated commercially for their timber. Willow wood is strong but pliant and lightweight, making it a popular choice in the manufacturing of a wide range of items, including boxes and crates, furniture, toys, and even boats. Willow can also be found in craftwork items such as paper, rope, and basket weaving. Willow trees are also popular choices for planting along streams and river banks as a method of preventing soil erosion, as their thick interlocking root systems make them very effective at holding onto soil, as well as being a popular ornamental tree prized for the shade that they provide, as in the case of the weeping willow. Traditionally, willow has also long served as a staple of medicinal treatments for Indigenous peoples in North America, and medicinal uses of willow have also been mentioned in the text of many ancient cultures, from Assyria, to Egypt, to Greece. This lines up well with the fact that willow bark is charged with salicylic acid, which is a precursor for Aspirin.



## Cultural Significance

Willow is commonly associated with flexibility in many cultures due to its ability to bend into outrageous formations without snapping. In Chinese culture, willow branches are also associated with spirits and the dead as they are traditionally used during the Qing Ming festival 清明節. Qing Ming, also known as the Tomb Sweeping festival, is observed annually as a holiday recognizing one's ancestors. A key component of the festival is to visit the graves of the ancestors, pay respects, and tidy up the space around the tombstone (hence the festival's English namesake, the Tomb Sweeping festival), and willow branches were traditionally used during this tidying process.

Additionally, the widely worshipped folk deity Goddess of Mercy, Guanyin, is commonly portrayed as being seated on a rock, with a willow branch placed in a vase of water by her feet that is believed to help keep evil spirits away, and carvings made from willow wood are the material of choice for Taoist priests communicating with the spirits of the dead. On the other side of the Asian continent, willow also plays an important role in Jewish culture as one of the Four Species associated with the Jewish festival Sukkot, which is both a biblical holiday commemorating the 40 years that descendants of Israel spent wandering the desert, as well as an agricultural festival celebrating the harvest and end of the Israeli agricultural year. One of the important customs during this seven day holiday as laid out in the Torah is the waving of the Four Species, of which willow is one, at special ceremonies.

