

# Leaves, Limbs, Needles & Boughs

by Fred Opperman



This month's tree is *Salix alba* — White willow, and it was highlighted on the back cover of "Outdoor Highlights," the Illinois Department of Conservation newsletter. I will use the article in its entirety. It is very interesting, and I hope you enjoy it.

Willows are a family of trees and shrubs that grow chiefly in the northern hemisphere's temperate zones, but can be found also in the arctic, the tropics and in alpine areas. Among the 170 to 200 varieties are species ranging from an inch or two high to some more than 100 feet tall. The average height is 20 to 30 feet.

About half of the known species grow in North America, many of them in Illinois. They thrive in moist soils beside lakes, ponds, marshes, drainage ditches and waterways.

While willows have been considered symbols of sorrow and grace historically, this tree is anything but. The wood is soft, fine grained and light, and has numerous uses. Products made from it include charcoal, barrels, cores for veneer, boxes, paper pulp, crates, some furniture, artificial limbs, coffins, baskets, wicker furniture and black powder. String and rope are manufactured from the tough outer bark. Tannin, for tanning leather, is obtained from the bitter inner bark.

Primitive peoples have chewed willow leaves and bark or applied them to injuries for relief of pain and fever since prehistoric times. In 1853, this "home remedy" led scientists to the discovery of aspirin, which was manufactured from the willow's leaves and bark.



Willow trees and shrubs also are popular for windbreaks, living fences, ornamental and shade tree plantings and to control stream bank, wind or gully erosion. One reason is they are easy to start. Woven willow mats placed on a riverbank, levee or earthen dam sometimes will take root and form a nearly impenetrable living shield against soil loss. Twigs falling on muddy stream banks frequently root and develop into new trees, and even sticks or poles stuck upright in a muddy riverbank can develop roots and begin growing.

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(“Willows” continued)

Rabbits, deer and beaver regard willow trees and shrubs as favorite winter foods. In the spring, many bird species feed on the buds, while honey bees swarm to its nectar-bearing flowers.

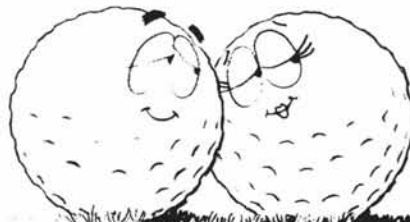
The willow’s simple, alternate leaves may be extremely narrow and pointed or very broad, depending on the species. The leaves on most trees are 2 to 6 inches long. The flowers are tiny and grow in catkins — clusters around a central axis stem. Male and female flowers may grow on separate trees, on the same tree or within the same catkin. The bark generally is dark and rough or shaggy.

Willow seeds are miniscule and have tufts of tiny hairs by which they are carried long distances on the wind to suitable growing areas. However, unless they fall in a damp place within a few hours they will die.

Black willow, which may ascend to 120 feet and have a trunk diameter of 3 to 4 feet, is the willow species most used for lumber. Others common in Illinois are the crack and golden — or, white — willows (80 feet tall, trunk diameter of 4 feet), peachleaf and sandbar willows (70 feet), weeping willow (60 feet, 5 foot trunk diameter), shining and pussy willows (25 feet, 1 foot trunk diameter).

Among flowering plants, the willow is an ancient. Fossil evidence dates it back 70 to 160 million years. Because of the great distances their seeds can be carried by the wind, it is probable that they were the first woody plants to gain a foothold in Illinois after the glaciers melted and exposed the land.

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