

# WILLOWS THAT DON'T WEEP

by Lynn Chimera

When you think of a willow the first thing that comes to mind is probably the classic weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*) which originated in China. However, there are about 40 varieties of willow native to North America. According to Doug Tallamy *Salix* support the third highest number of butterfly larva of any plant, at least 455 species.

Willows are fast growing which makes them good for reclamation projects along streams and lakes. Their intertwining roots help to fortify the banks and prevent erosion. They are also very easy to propagate. A dormant stem can be rooted in water or simply pushed into the ground and chances are it will root and grow. Most of the willows require full to at least ½ a day of direct sun and moist soil.

Native Americans across the Americas relied on willow as a staple of their medical treatments. It provides temporary pain relief. Salicin is metabolized into salicylic acid in the human body, and is a precursor of aspirin.

One of the most familiar native willows is the classic pussy willow (*Salix discolor*). Its catkins are a sure sign of spring. (Catkins are flower clusters usually a spike with tiny or no petals. In the case of willows they are wind pollinated.) Willows are dioecious, with male and female flowers appearing as catkins on separate plants; the catkins are produced early in the spring, often before the leaves.

It's the male flowers that swell and puff out as soon as the weather warms up. *Salix discolor* can be a multi stem shrub or tree which can reach 20 feet high. The best catkins form on new wood so if you're growing for the pussy willows cut back the shrub hard every other year after blooming.

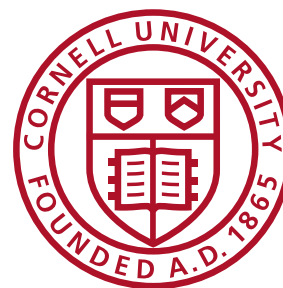
Black willow (*Salix nigra*) is native in most of the US and is the largest of the native willows. It is very common in our area especially near streams and boggy areas such as Ellicott Creek. Black willow prefers full sun and moist soil including tolerating seasonal flooding. This is a large tree attaining up to 60 feet. It is a stately tree looking very much like the weeping willow except without the weeping branches.

One problem with growing willows is their roots seek out water and can penetrate water pipes and cause problems. The home I grew up in had a huge willow in front. It was fun to play under in the summer, but the roots were constantly damaging the water lines and the tree finally had to be removed. Another concern is the wood is weak. After 50 years branches can break off.

If you have the right location, give one of our natives a try.



*Image by Jennys77 for Pixabay*



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