



TREE OF THE MONTH

White Willow • *Salix alba*

ALSO KNOWN AS: WEEPING WILLOW

The white willow (*Salix alba*), is the largest of the willow tree species. It is most often found growing in wet areas along streams and rivers, and prefers moist soils. The rounded, leaning crown is distinctive in the landscape.

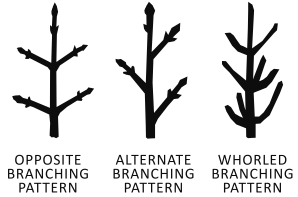
White willows have deciduous foliage, with leaves that turn a bronze yellow color in the autumn. Leaves' undersides are light green to white and covered with downy hairs.

Bark is yellowish, ridged, and furrowed. Twigs are a medium yellow color. They are slender and flexible, which has made them useful in basket making. The mature height of the trees is between 50 -100 feet.

White willows are dioecious, meaning that individual flowers are either male or female, and only one sex is found on one tree. Both male and female flowers grow on drooping clusters called catkins. The male catkins tend to be more showy, while the female catkins are smaller in size. After pollination by insects, female catkins lengthen and develop small capsules. White willow seeds are encased within the capsules and will eventually be dispersed by the wind.

White willow is important for many animal species, and to bees in particular because it is a good early source of nectar and pollen. The tree is also an important food source for the caterpillars of many butterfly species, and more than 200 other species of insects are associated with the tree.

The white willow can be easily confused with many other willow species because they all freely hybridize.



White willow bark has been used as a painkiller for thousands of years. The painkiller Aspirin is actually derived from salicin, a compound that is found in the bark of all willow tree species. The branches of white willow trees have been used by many Native American tribes to make dream catchers. The Apache laid out willow branches and lashed them together in order to make cradleboards and the Kiowa and Blackfoot made backrests by binding branches together with sinew threads.

Text : Karissa Yzerman-Gleason,
Illustration : Elizabeth Orenstein



Tree of the Month is a collaboration between BEAT, the City of Pittsfield, Pittsfield Tree Watch, and the MA Department of Conservation & Recreation's Greening the Gateway Cities Program. Find out more at thebeatnews.org.