



TREE OF THE MONTH

Pussy Willow • *Salix discolor*

ALSO KNOWN AS: AMERICAN PUSSY WILLOW, GLAUCOUS WILLOW

Pussy willow is a small tree or shrub with an alternate branching pattern that native to most of North America. Fast growing and short-lived, they usually reach no taller than 25 feet. Favoring wetlands, pussy willows are known for their fuzzy catkins (long clusters of blossoms) that bloom as early as February and as late as May.



OPPOSITE BRANCHING PATTERN



ALTERNATE BRANCHING PATTERN



WHORLED BRANCHING PATTERN

Pussy willows have male and female plants, meaning that they are dioecious (from the Greek for two houses – in this case, male and female). The much-loved early spring sight of pussy willow branches with their fuzzy catkins are actually the male flowers in their early blooming stage. On both male and female plants, the flowers emerge from the shiny, smooth, brown buds.

The fuzz, or fur, of early blooms is actually thousands of tiny hairs that insulate the nascent flowers during cold, early spring weather. When in full bloom, the male flowers' stamens project far above the fur and hold their golden, pollen-covered heads aloft for the wind to blow the pollen to a waiting female tree. Female flowers have smaller, lighter green pistils projecting out of the fuzz on their catkins, and are less noticeable.

While many willow species have fuzzy catkins, *Salix discolor* has the roundest, fuzziest in our experience. You can see many willow species bloom by cutting twigs in late winter and putting them in a vase with water near a window. Watch as the buds either peel back or are ejected off while the blooms emerge or unfurl. If you're lucky, you might even see the beginnings of a leaf.

Like all willows, pussy willow buds lie close to the stem. This species is notable for the larger, rounded buds and their shiny, dark brown color. Twigs can range from green-brown to purple-brown.

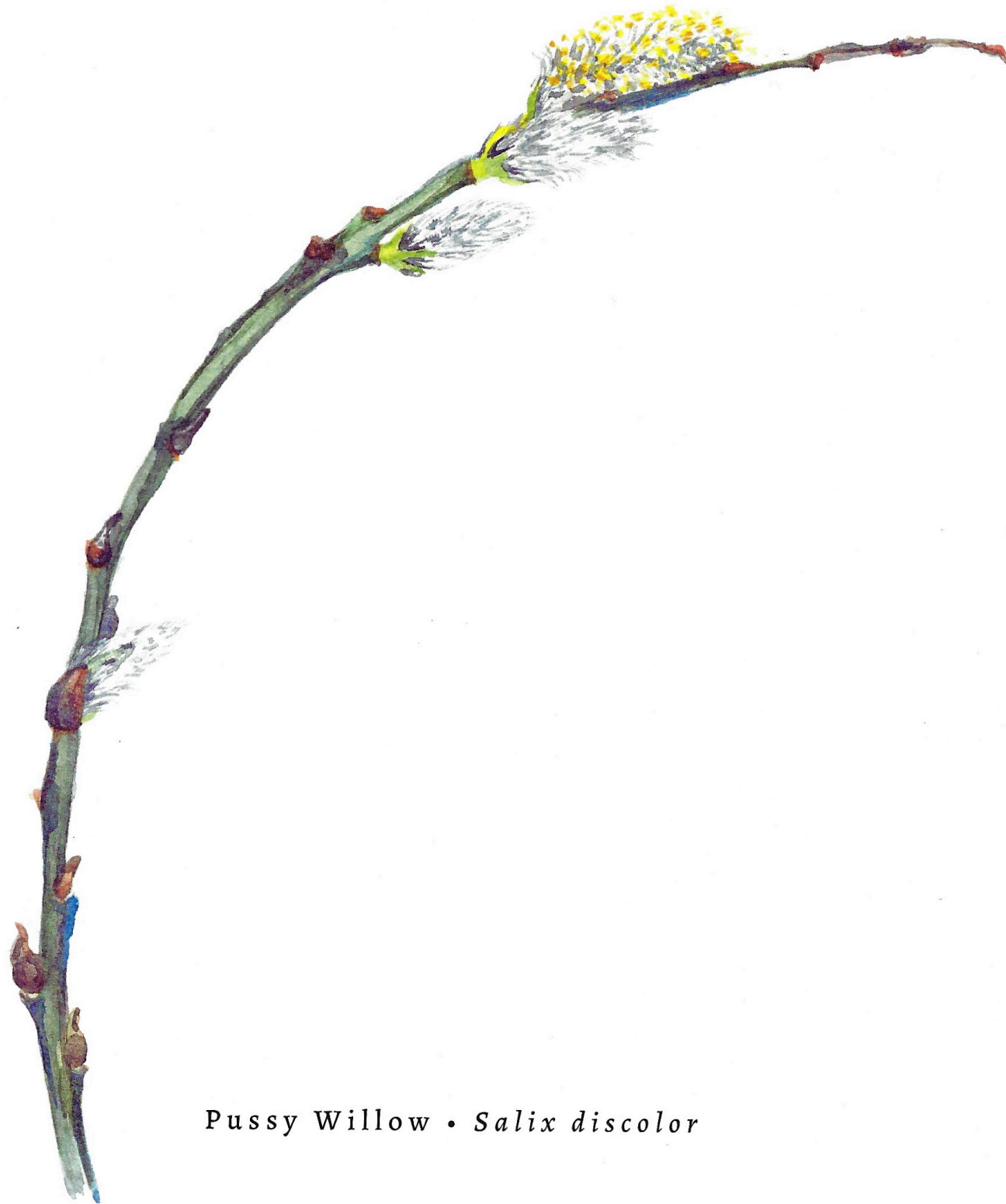
Pussy willow is a larval host for many kinds of butterflies, including the viceroy and mourning cloak.

Many willow species, including the pussy willow, have the compound *salicin* in their bark. This is an anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving agent. Teas and other medicines made from willow bark have been used for centuries by cultures around the world to treat pain. The active ingredient in aspirin, salicylic acid, has been historically derived from willow bark.

The Latin species epithet (species name), *discolor*, refers to the pussy willow's leaves, which have lighter undersides and darker tops.



Tree of the Month is part of the 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.



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