

How to Plant Willow Cuttings

Information provided by Vermont Willow Nursery

What you are getting: 9-10” dormant stem cuttings from the previous years growth.

When to plant: Plant after the ground has thawed. Your cuttings may be stored in the plastic bag for up to 2 weeks in the coldest part of a refrigerator (not freezer). It's important that cuttings retain as much of their original moisture as possible and that they be shielded from light so they do not start growing. If not planted within a few days of arrival, stand the cuttings upright in a bucket of water overnight to rehydrate them.

Where to plant: Willows prefer full sun, but will tolerate partial shade. When preparing the planting area, the inclusion of organic matter into the soil is always a good idea to retain moisture. We have never fertilized any of our willows! Most willows are tolerant of soil and wind conditions, however they do best in heavier, moisture-retentive soil. The planting ground into which the cutting is to be planted should be weed free. To keep weeds down, mulching or planting through holes in 6mil black plastic or geotextile works well. Mulch over the black material helps keep the soil cool and aids growth.

Caution: Like most large trees, Willow roots travel a long way and will seek out drains and other sources of moisture. They also transpire a large quantity of water and will tend to dry out a heavy clay soil—therefore, do not plant near a septic system, building or foundations. If you must plant near a structure, cuttings should be placed a distance from the building of 1½ times its eventual height. If left untrimmed, some varieties grow into large trees.

How to Plant cuttings: With a 9-10in cutting, plant so that 8in is under (into) ground. Using a pointed implement — tire iron, a half-inch rebar or a small crow-bars, make a hole that is a bit deeper than the cutting to be planted and a little wider than the stem diameter at the butt end. Insert the cutting with the lateral buds pointing upwards ^. Firm the soil around the cutting to exclude air pockets and water if the soil is dry. Leave only one or two buds above the soil level.

Spacing: If planting willow for annual harvesting, a space of 12-24in is recommended between plants. Annual cutting will maintain plant vigor and produce multiple stems; younger stems tend to be more highly colored. Some colored bark varieties do not develop their full color until just before leaf drop.

Watering: In our clay-based loamy soil we rarely have to water except right after planting. In drier climates, be sure to water the cuttings in well and repeat weekly until leaves are growing lustily; then water once a month. We recommend drip irrigation as the water goes just to the roots and there is less waste. In drought years, as in 2016, frequent watering is necessary!

When to prune/cut back: Cutting should be done when the plant is dormant—before any green buds show. With sharp pruning shears, cut each rod as close to the ground as possible. First harvest can be done in late winter/early spring after the first growing season. Don't worry, the plant will have developed a good root system during the summer and you won't kill it by cutting it back. Also don't fret if your willows are bent over by snow and ice—they almost always spring back to vertical!

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