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*Salix*

*Salicaceae*

*Salix* is derived from Celtic *sal* (near) and *lis* (water) components, and is a Latin name for 'willow'.

The name 'willow' comes from one of the Old English words *wilig*, *welige* or *withig* that refer to a plant that would be suitable for making ties. Twigs from some species of the willow (including the white willow, *Salix alba*) are sufficiently supple for use in basketry and fine wickerwork. This general name translates in other languages into *Felber* (German), *Harab* (Hebrew), *Helyg* (Welsh), *Itea* (Greek), *Pajut* (Finnish), *Pil* (Swedish), *Salcio* (Italian), *Saue* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Saugh* (Scots Gaelic), *Saule* (French), *Saux* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Sauze* (Spanish), *Seilich* (Irish Gaelic), *Selje* (Norwegian), *Treurwilg* (Dutch), *Weide* (German), *Welge* (Flemish), *Wide* (Swedish) and *Wilg* (Dutch).

In Greek mythology the willow was dedicated to Circe (a sorceress best known for her evil spells and enchantments), Hecate (a divinity of the Underworld) and Persephone (wife of Hades who was lord of the Underworld) all of whom represented aspects of death. Thus all willows became a symbol of sadness and mourning particularly the weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*) with its drooping branches. [This has persisted into more recent times as witnessed by references made in the works of the English poets Edmund Spenser (c.1552-1599) probably most familiar as author of *The Faerie Queene*, and Robert Herrick (1591-1633), William Shakespeare (1564-1616) the famous English playwright, poet and actor, and William Thackeray (1811-1863), the English novelist.]

In some parts of Britain willow was not brought inside the house as it was believed to be unlucky. Yet in contrast in the Middle Ages there the willow was sacred to poets and was viewed as a source of eloquence and a willow wand was used as a love oracle. Then again on the negative side it was believed that a child beaten with a willow stick would suffer stunted growth (the willow decays early) and that animals should never experience a whip made from willow either. Many fen-men in East Anglia would not burn willow in the house or use the stems for fencing. So much so apparently that it was difficult to dispose of the remains of willows felled for cricket-bat wood even to the poorest of families.

Cushions and pillows used to be stuffed with the silky catkins of certain varieties.

Modern western flower arrangers have long subscribed to the belief that aspirin in flower water will help to extend the life of cut flowers. Although the mechanics of how this works may not as yet be fully understood scientists have confirmed that the 'belief' is not far-fetched and that the ageing process is retarded. Apparently more recent research suggests that salicylic acid could be as important for the health of plants as it is for that of human beings. Spraying it on the plant would appear to aid protection from diseases and this could have particular significance for agriculture and horticulture. This chemical is found naturally in species of willow.

References to the willow are common in literature. There are many in the plays and poetry of the respected Englishman already mentioned, William Shakespeare (1564-1616).

Probably one of the most familiar is to be discovered in *Twelfth Night* when Viola says  
Make me a willow-cabin at your gate,

And call upon my soul within the house;  
Write loyal cantons .....

The willow is mentioned in Part III of *Henry VI* too when the French Queen's sister, Lady Bona says

Tell him, in hope he'll prove a widower shortly,  
I'll wear the willow garland for his sake.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century John Keble (1792-1866) the English poet and Anglican churchman wrote of *The Willow*.

See the soft green willow springing  
Where the waters gently pass,  
Every way her free arms flinging  
O'er the moist and reedy grass;  
Long ere winter blasts are fled,  
See her tipped with vernal red,  
And her kindly flower displayed  
Ere her leaf can cast a shade.

.....

All those species of willow that are used medicinally have narrow, lance-shaped leaves.

Records show that their use for easing pain has long been familiar on more than one Continent. It goes back to 400 BC at least in south-eastern Europe and the Middle East as the Greek physician, Hippocrates (c. 460-377 or 359 BC) noted that an infusion made from the leaves was often prescribed during childbirth. While on the North American Continent it has been shown that some centuries later North American Indian tribes there were using a bark extract for pain relief. Then in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century modern Western medicine made a break through. The German pharmaceutical company Bayer, launched Aspirin ie. salicylic acid, as already mentioned, a chemical found naturally in species of willow. The commercial drug's part in easing pain in humans has long been appreciated and its role in human medicine has been extended more recently to offering some protection from heart attack and thrombosis. Herbalists also recommended willows generally for the treatment of cramp, warts and fever, and a decoction of the leaves or bark was also believed to be able to get rid of dandruff.