

Salix alba

[Synonyms : *Salix alba* var. *caerulea*, *Salix alba* var. *calva*, *Salix alba* var. *vitellina*, *Salix aurea*, *Salix vitellina*]

WHITE WILLOW is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to northern Asia, to Europe (rare in Britain) and to the Mediterranean it has greenish-yellow catkins and leaves that turn yellow in Autumn.

It is also known as *Ak Soynd ag* (Turkish), *Bis* (Hindi, Punjabi), European willow, *Guldpil* (Swedish), *Gulpil* (Swedish), *Hopeapaju* (Finnish), *Osier blanc* (French), Popple, *Safsafa* (Maltese), *Salcio bianco* (Italian), *Salicastro* (Italian), *Salice bianco* (Italian), *Salice da pertiche* (Italian), Salicin willow, *Saliko blanka* (Esperanto), *Sauce* (Spanish), Saugh, *Saule blanc* (French), *Silberweide* (German), *Silverpil* (Swedish), *Valkopaju* (Finnish), *Vanlig vitpil* (Swedish), *Vitpil* (Swedish), *Vivir* (Kashmiri), *Vrba biela* (Slovak), *Vrba bílá* (Czech), *Vrba hlavatá* (Czech), Willow, Withe, and Withy; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of bravery, celibacy, forsaken love, and freedom.

Warning – the leaves can be poisonous for humans and can cause abdominal pain.

Alba means ‘white’ with reference to the colour of the leaves.

In addition to basketry the wood was used for making agricultural implements including hurdles and fencing, as well as some musical instruments. The backs of some of the oldest Italian cellos have been made out of willow.

At some point white willow must have been introduced to the North American Continent as records show that the Cherokee Indian tribe included it (the bark especially) in their medicinal repertoire. It was used to treat fever, diarrhoea and hoarseness and in addition to being taken as a tonic, a bark decoction or infusion was used as a hair wash to encourage growth.

This is one of the willows chosen for making cricket bats.

Medicinally, wherever this and other species grow herbalists have recommended the bark for the treatment of pain, fever and arthritis for thousands of years – as the bark is a natural source of salicylic acid (as is meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria*) on which aspirin is based. It has also been used as a remedy for indigestion, diarrhoea, dysentery, rheumatism, gout and worms, as well as being prescribed for convalescents recovering after debilitating illness. Today white willow is used in homoeopathic treatments.

It is the birthday flower for 22nd May.