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Salix fragilis

[Synonyms : *Salix excelsa*, *Salix russelliana*]

CRACK WILLOW is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to western Asia and Europe (including Britain) it has yellow catkins and in Autumn leaves that turn yellow.

It is also known as Brittle willow, *Bruch-Weide* (German), Cat's tails, *Helygen Frau* (Welsh), *Knäckeplil* (Swedish), *Knack-Weide* (German), *Kraakwilg* (Dutch), *Mimbre* (Spanish), *Pil* (Swedish), *Salice fragile* (Italian), *Skörpil* (Swedish), Snap willow, *Vrba křehká* (Czech), Wicker, Withe, Withy, and Wyth.

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

Fragilis is derived from Latin *frango* (to break, break in pieces, shatter) meaning ‘fragile or brittle’ with reference to the shoots.

It is thought that this willow was used by the Romans, and centuries of Europeans following them, to make baskets. Certainly it is claimed that when eventually it was introduced to North America before the American Civil War in the 1860s, it was with the intent of using it for basketmaking.

Crack willows are a familiar sight on many British riverbanks where they have often been encouraged in order to stabilise the bank edges, particularly along the Thames and the Cam.

Authorities note that it was crack willows that provided so much of the background for the classic children's book *The Wind in the Willows* written by the Scotsman, Kenneth Grahame (1859-1932).

In North America some of the Chippewa Indian tribe used the bark to stop wounds bleeding and to heal sores.

The wood has been used in the past in North America for fuel and for making charcoal. The latter was primarily destined for gunpowder.

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

Medicinally, crack willow is used today in homoeopathic treatments.