

# Planting tips for willow cuttings

Willow readily grows from stem cuttings making propagation easy. You can grow your own willow for weaving or perhaps to create a willow hedge. Cuttings are usually 25-30cm long and vary in thickness depending on the variety chosen.

Successful growth depends on good site preparation, correct spacing, careful planting and a long term plan for dealing with weeds.

## Site preparation

The amount of preparation required on a site depends on the scale of planting being undertaken. Whatever the scale, good weed control in the first 2 to 3 years is very important to allow cuttings to establish effectively.

With large-scale planting, the usual practice is to spray the site in the late summer with a broad-spectrum contact herbicide, plough to 30cm depth and power harrow in the spring. This provides a good, weed-free tilth that makes future weed control measures more straightforward.

If planting on a smaller scale, cultivate the soil to a depth of 30cm to produce a fine tilth. An alternative to using sprays for smaller areas is to use either plastic or a water permeable woven polythene. The cuttings are planted through the sheet; this increases soil temperature in the spring and retains water during the summer. Using a sheet that will last at least 3 years is well worth the investment (thinner sheets will only last a year).

## Planting

The ideal time for planting is from December until the end of April but do not plant if there is frost on the ground. Cuttings should be planted as soon after they are received as possible. If this is not possible, they can be stored in a fridge until planting can be done although the sooner the better.

The 30cm cuttings are pushed vertically into the soil leaving about 5cm proud of the surface; 1m cuttings are planted at a depth of 30-45cm. If the soil is such that the rods have to be forced in, make a hole first with a metal rod in order that the bark is not damaged in the planting process. Firm up the soil around the cutting. Make sure that cuttings are the right way up, buds pointing upwards – they will grow upside down but they prefer not to!

Optimum spacing arrangements for growing large numbers of willows depend on which varieties are being grown, what size rods are wanted, what the weed control methods will be and how the willows will be harvested. The closest is 25 x 25cm and the furthest apart (for biomass production) is 1.5m x 1.5m – not counting cricket bat willows, which are spaced 25m apart. Generally, the taller and thicker the rods required, the further apart they should be spaced. A common spacing is around 30cm x 50cm for fine basketry willows and 40cm x 80cm if tall Osier is required for hurdle or sculptural work. To plant a willow hedge, plant 4 to 6, 30cm cuttings every metre.

## Long term weed control

There are 3 principle weed control alternatives. Spraying with a foliar acting herbicide when the stools are dormant. This is really restricted to large-scale growers, as it must be done under licence. Hand-weeding with hoes and hand hooks which should be done regularly and often. Mulching with ground sheets (best done before planting), straw, cardboard or other organic material. It is important not to smother the growing shoots with this last method.

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