

# WILLOW

## LATIN NAME

*Salix alba*

## SYNONYMS

White willow  
European willow

## FAMILY

Willow family (*Salicaceae*)

## BOTANY

A deciduous fast-growing tree with rough bark on the trunk and smooth on new branches and twigs which are bendy but brittle at the base. White buds (pussy-willows) appear in early spring and are followed by the characteristic flowers (catkins) which are pollinated by bees, and appear together with the leaves from March to June.

## MEDICINAL / EDIBLE

### PARTS

Bark and leaves

### WHERE FOUND

The willow can be found all over Europe, from southern Norway to the Himalayas. It grows in moist or wet soil, by streams or rivers, in marshes and woods (although it does not like shade). Willows are known to attract wildlife.

### DOSE

1-2 tsp fresh or dried bark to 250ml water. Make a decoction by simmering for a few minutes, then leave to infuse for 15 minutes.  
Drink 1 cup per day.

Combines well with limeflowers, ginger, celery seed, rosemary and yarrow.

Early spring is the best time to harvest willow bark for medicine, and it is also the easiest time to identify the willow varieties with their white catkins and brightly coloured yellow, orange or red bark. Weeping willow and corkscrew willow are both varieties of *Salix alba*. Strip the bark from young branches before the sap begins to run, while the catkins are out - start at the bottom, and peel off in strips. Dry at room temperature and store in a jar.

### Phytochemicals

The bark and, to a lesser extent, the leaves contain phenolic glycosides called salicin and salicylic acid, as well as tannins catechins, coumarin and flavonoids.

### Medicinal use

Willow is cooling, drying and tonic. It is antirheumatic, antiseptic, and anti-inflammatory. And excellent remedy for rheumatic complaints, painful joints and muscles, and for musculoskeletal complaints such as sciatica and backache.

Willow bark has been used for thousands of years as a natural aspirin, to relieve pain, to manage fevers, and to calm inflammation. The effect takes about 8 hours to reach its peak. It is slower and milder than aspirin because the body converts salicin into salicylic acid, which is the most active pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory ingredient. The advantage is that salicin does not irritate the stomach lining like salicylic acid and aspirin can do.

Salicylates are anti-inflammatory to muscle, bone and connective tissue, and can be used for sports injuries and inflammatory conditions. Trials have shown that willow works well on osteoarthritic pain.

It helps reduce fever by increasing peripheral blood flow and perspiration, as well as decreasing prostaglandin production.

Willow can also be used as a mild anticoagulant, especially in combination with melilot, garlic or limeflowers.

The astringent and tonic qualities make willow a good remedy for digestive complaints such as loose bowels and chronic diarrhea. It can also be used externally in a bath to tone the skin, and as a remedy for dandruff.

**Warnings:** Do not use willow if you are allergic to aspirin or salicylates.

### Ecology and folklore

Willow has been used as a medicine for over 2000. In 1763 the Reverend Edward Stone from Oxfordshire used it successfully to treat malarial fever, and in 1838 a chemist isolated salicylic acid from willow which was synthesized as acetylsalicylic acid, better known as aspirin.

