



Section 6

Embedding care for our outdoor spaces into our experiences

Root exposure: When roots are exposed above the soil, they're easily damaged; they can be worn and torn by foot traffic. Damaged roots can't do their job of collecting water and nutrients to support the tree.

🗨️ I wonder how long the roots are and if we can follow them out from the tree?

Insects and diseases: that burrow, eat or destroy different parts of the plant.

🗨️ In late spring or early summer, let's check if our trees are healthy and let our landowner know. See [Forestry Scotland's guidance](#) on tree diseases.



6.7 Willow structures

Why willow matters

- It provides shade and shelter. It can be a special place where children can play and feel they have a sense of privacy.
- It improves the biodiversity of our outdoor space. There are a range of willow species native to Scotland. Osier willow ([Salix viminalis](#)) is commonly used to create structures. It is one of the first trees to flower in the spring, providing an early source of food for many pollinators.
- It creates interesting play structures and features. Living willow can be bent to make a range of play structures including screens, hedges, dens, tunnels and other play structures.
- Willows provide a fast growing and renewable supply of art and building material. The rods (withies) can be used to create sculptures, artwork, baskets.
- It can help with managing our climate. Willow likes damp places and holds a lot of water. It can help play a part in storm water management and contribute to capturing carbon.

Building upon prior learning

- Children have experience of playing with a willow structure and are interested in the pruning work needed to keep it healthy.
- Children find and play with willow sticks and/or willow baskets and other willow resources.
- Children use charcoal in their drawings and may be interested in finding out how it was made.



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Reflective thoughts

- What size are our willow structures? Do we have a variety, some at a small height for babies and toddlers? Do we have ones that are accessible by children who have a physical disability or wheelchair bound?
- In what ways do we use willow rods creatively?
- What traditions, festivals and celebrations involve willow that would be relevant to our children?
- What examples of willow products do we have in our setting and in children's homes?

Before you begin

- Landowner permission is needed to plant willow directly into the ground. Alternatively, willow can grow in deep raised beds and containers on hard surfaces.
- With your children, think about the intended purpose, type of structure, its location, height and how it links to other play features in your space.
- Avoid planting over underground utilities. Willow prefers damp rather than dry ground.
- Consider the surfacing around the structure and its accessibility particularly for the children with mobility needs. Create a path or base first before planting willow and extend this beyond the entrances to avoid the growth of mud patches.
- Weed matting around the base can help the structure grow.

- Professional willow workers can install a structure. Ensure they show several staff how to care for and maintain it.
- A cost-effective approach is to fund a couple of staff to attend a willow structures course and use rods donated from other willow structures locally. They can then maintain the willow structure with children year on year.

Maintenance

- Maintaining any willow structure is an essential job. Once established, it can grow very quickly and requires year-on-year care.
- If a willow structure becomes unsafe because it has not been adequately maintained, you must ensure it is repaired or removed.
- The annual main pruning and weaving happens in winter and children enjoy getting involved. You need to ensure their input is given proper consideration as it involves the use of tools. A risk-benefit assessment will help here.
- You can plant and create further structures from one original source. It is an economical approach to adding height, greenery and interesting spaces into your outdoor area.
- The spare willow rods created through the annual pruning can be used by children for further planting, sculpting and other creative features.
- The annual maintenance and ongoing care are opportunities for all staff to learn what is involved. This can ensure continuity of care as experienced staff can support but if they move on, then others have the required competency.



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Caring for our willow structures

Willow structures can be inadvertently damaged through play activities. Involving children in the planting and aftercare of willow structures is a way into talking about impacts and to gain their thoughts about how to minimise potential damage. This includes:

- Foliage stripping:
 - 🗨️ I wonder if there are other leaves lying around we can use.
- Branch breaking:
 - 🗨️ We can prune the willow branches which is better for the tree. Let's put a note in the calendar to do this over winter.
- Soil compaction around the base:
 - 🗨️ I wonder if we need visual matting and how wide should this be?
- Development of mud through and around the structure.
 - 🗨️ This structure needs a rest from us playing here until we fix the ground and sort out the mud.
- Willow structures can also suffer stress from becoming top heavy if they are not pruned and cared for. Likewise, they may need watering in prolonged periods of dry weather.

“It’s a place for our imaginations to grow. We have an established willow dome in our outdoor area which the children love. They use it in all sorts of ways, such as rolling small cable reels into it to make a house, café and even an ice-cream stand on warmer days. We put den building material near it which they use to make it darker inside. It’s sometimes a quiet story space and we have windchimes hanging inside and old CDs which reflect the sunlight beautifully. It has to be cut back in winter before it starts to bud as it grows so fast. It’s also easier to weave in the new shoots as they appear.”

Lisa Alexander, Westfield Nursery, West Lothian”



Find out more

- **Out to Learn Willow** has advice about maintaining willow structures including pruning, watering and looking after the surfaces around your structure
- There are lots of online video clips about planting and maintaining willow
- For information visit the **Willow Scotland** website