

USEFUL INFO

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HOW TO GET THERE

For the Glamorgan Heritage Coast Centre at Dunraven Bay, exit junction 35 of the M4, onto the A473. At fourth roundabout turn left onto B4524. Follow the coast road to Southerndown.

COURSE

OUT TO LEARN WILLOW

☎ 01656 881007

🌐 outtolearnwillow.co.uk

Workshops in living willow, garden crafts, hedgerow hoops and hearts and basketry from £50 per person.



OTHER COURSES

MUSGROVE WILLOWS,

SOMERSET

☎ 01278 691105

🌐 www.willowcourses.com

Courses in basketry, coffin weaving and garden structures. £25 for half day, £50 for one day.

JANE FROST WILLOW

WORKSHOP, CAMBS

☎ 01353 861944

🌐 www.wwt.org.uk

Learn to make living willow plant supports and garden structures at WWT Welney in Cambridgeshire. £55 per person, plus £20 for materials.

STAY

LITTLE WEST BUNGALOWS

Southerndown CF32 0PY

☎ 01656 880532

🌐 littlewestbungalows.co.uk

Friendly B&B with panoramic views over the Bristol Channel.



Willow weaving Glamorgan

Learn to sculpt living willow into hoops, hearts, baskets and gothic arches for your garden **Words:** Jo Tinsley **Pictures:** Jenny Hardy



Courses take place next to the secluded coves of the Heritage Coast

You might think willow weaving is for girls, but it wasn't always the case. 100 years ago, basketry was very much a man's business. In his 1912 book, *The Art of Basket Making*, Thomas Okey said, "obviously the coarser and heavier work must be made by men, demanding, as it does, considerable physical strength, especially of the fingers and wrist and a position of the body ill-adapted for women workers." Women could make lighter baskets but "the art must be regarded as a serious business of life, to be thoroughly learned and strenuously practised, and not as another of the feeble, feminine digital activities by which vacuous hours may be whiled away."

I'm not sure what Okey would think about the Out to Learn Willow course. On the one hand, my tutors were talking about willow with a fervour that not only spoke of strenuous practice but also bordered on obsession. On the other hand, I was rather looking forward to whiling away a few vacuous hours.

PRESERVE THE CURVE

We started out with a basic hoop. Our tutors – Clare, a school teacher and Mel, a graphic designer – started working with willow 10 years ago and now provide courses on the Glamorgan Heritage Coast. Holding the willow rod up, Mel explained that the thin end is called the tip and the thick bottom is the butt end. Cue chortles and a round of innuendo as we chose our willow. There are around 250 varieties in all, with colourful names such as Flanders red, Black Maul and Dicky Meadows. I chose a thick but bendy green piece.

The trick is to "preserve the curve". Holding the hoop against my stomach, I gently formed a loop then threaded the thin end in and out until the hoop naturally kept its shape. Then, it was just a matter of threading in more rods to create a neat rope effect or, in my case, fashion a rather unruly but appealing hoop.

We quickly moved from hoops to hedgerow hearts – a two-man job, with one person holding the butt ends

while the other gently twists the tips then teases them into a heart shape before weaving in more rods.

BASKETRY FOR BEGINNERS

After cream tea, we got down to the "serious and strenuously practiced" business of basket making. As we worked, Clare chatted about the plant's history – it's thought that basketry is an even older craft than pottery – and its exceptional properties. Willow is vigorous, often growing 15-20ft a year, a carbon capturing plant and the best habitat for wildlife after oak.

It's advantage for crafts, however, is its flexibility. We were working with fresh living willow today, but you can rejuvenate dry willow by soaking it, one hour per foot. "When I didn't have a soaking tank, I'd soak the willow in the bath," Clare laughed. "I'd take the willow out, put the children in, remove the children, put the willow back. Repeat as necessary".

GARDEN SCULPTURES

After lunch, we slung bundles over our shoulders and set out along the coast path towards Dunraven Castle, an intriguing ruin that was deliberately razed to the ground in 1963. Today all that remains is the walled garden, with ivy that creeps up crumbling walls and arched doorways with barely a wall to justify them – an ideal setting for a gothic willow arch.

Clare showed us how to make a hole with what looked like a metal pogo stick, and then we planted five willow rods 18" deep and roughly pleated them until they curved into a natural arch. Incredibly, willow has spots of rooting hormone along the bark so, if you do this in winter, your garden sculpture will take root.

Clare and Mel sent me off with a bundle of willow and a head full of ideas. Back home, I couldn't leave the willow alone and that same evening I rustled up a birdcage, of which I am still immensely proud. I might not have many vacuous hours in my life, but if I can find a couple, there are worse ways to idly while them away.

1 Basketry requires patience 2 Hearts are a two-person job 3 Finding the perfect spot for a willow arch at Dunraven Castle 4 Checking the living willow for signs of life 5 Taking our bundles for a walk along the coast 6 & 7 A mini Welsh farm basket takes shape 8 Immensely proud

