**Salix alba**
[SAL-iks AL-buh]

**Family:** Salicaceae

**Names:** common willow, tree of enchantment, Witches Aspirin, withe, withy, salicyn willow, Osier, Sough Tree, saille; Ak Sogut, Safsaf Abyadh, Sauce Blanco, Sugut Aghaji, Vrba, Vitpil, vanlig vitpil (Swedish); Kvitpil (Norwegian); Hvidpil (Danish); Valkopaju, Hopeapaju (Finnish); Silber-Weide (German); Saule blanc (French)

**Description:** Tall, graceful tree to 65 feet with grayish-brown, deeply fissured bark. The long, steeply angled branches are obscured by distinctive silvery blue-green, narrow, tapering leaves that curl at the tip. In spring drooping, bright yellow male catkins appear. The fruiting female catkins are initially green then turn white and fluffy. It is hardy to zone 2 and is not frost tender. It is in flower from April to May, and the seeds ripen in June. The flowers are dioecious and are pollinated by bees. The plant is not self-fertile. It is noted for attracting wildlife.

**Cultivation:** A very easily grown plant, it succeeds in most soils, including wet, ill-drained or intermittently flooded soils, but prefers a damp, heavy soil in a sunny position. Rarely thrives on chalk and dislikes poor thin soils. Very tolerant of maritime exposure and atmospheric pollution. Trees respond well to coppicing or pollarding. Best planted into its permanent position as soon as possible, trees respond badly to transplanting unless they are moved regularly. The root system is rather aggressive and can cause problems with drains. A very important food plant for the caterpillars of many species of butterflies and a good bee plant, providing an early source of nectar and pollen. A very good wildlife habitat, more than 200 species of insects are associated with this tree.

There are many sub-species and cultivars in this species. *S. alba caerulea* is the cricket bat willow, cultivated for its wood. *S. alba vitellina* has been cultivated for its very tough stems that are used as tie rods in basket making. The cultivar 'Cardinal' is also grown for its use in basket making. Hybridizes freely with other members of this genus, especially *S. fragilis*, to which it is closely related. Trees
cast a relatively light shade. Dioecious. Male and female plants must be grown if seed is required.

Seed must be surface sown as soon as it is ripe in late spring. It has a very short viability, perhaps as little as a few days. Cuttings of mature wood of the current year’s growth, November to February in a sheltered outdoor bed or planted straight into their permanent position and given a good weed-suppressing mulch. Branches of older wood as long as 2.5 meters can be used. Very easy. Plant into their permanent positions in the autumn. Cuttings of half-ripe wood, June to August in a frame. Very easy. The leaves can be harvested throughout the growing season and are used fresh or dried. The bark or twigs are the plant parts collected in the spring or early autumn from 3-6 year old branches. If the willow is a tree, strip the bark from the newer, smooth barked branches (they are more potent); if it is a small, trunkless willow, cut the longer, thicker, and darker barked stems, strip the leaves off, and dry the switches in bunches. They may be cut into smaller pieces after drying and the whole stem used.

History: Willow bark has been used since the first century AD to reduce pain and inflammation. The tree also has an ancient reputation in folk medicine for reducing the temperature in fevers. In the 1820s the active ingredient responsible for willow’s medicinal properties, which is also found in meadowsweet, was isolated and named salicin, after the Salix genus. Around 70 years later, after salicin had been synthesized into salicylic acid, the drug aspirin was formulated and marketed.

According to medieval folklore, witches used willow to treat rheumatism and fever and the old word for witches, wicca, may be the origin of the term wicker, applied to baskets woven from willow twigs. ‘Pussy willow’, the fluffy silvery grey catkins, were reputed to turn into witches’ cats. In Elizabethan England, wearing a sprig of willow in your hat signified rejection by a loved one.

Constituents: the glycosides salicine (salicoside) picein, triandrin and saoicortine; esters of salicylic acid and salicyl alcohol, acetylated salicin, salicortin and salireposide, and tannins (catchin, p-coumaric acid); flavonoids. The European white willow is very similar in properties to the North American variety but contains more tannins

Properties: alterative, anodyne, febrifuge, astringent, antiperiodic, vermifuge, Antiinflammatory; Antiseptic; Diuretic; Hypnotic; Sedative; Tonic.

Energetics: bitter, cold

Meridians/Organs affected: liver, kidneys, heart

Medicinal Uses: The values of willow lie in the glycosides salicin and populin as well as the tannin. The uses are many, but most specifically in the reduction of inflammations of joints and membranes. Useful for headache (caused by dampness and heat in the gastrointestinal tract), recurring fevers, gonorrhea, ovarian pains, dyspepsia, dysentery, chronic diarrhea, neuralgia, rheumatic aches and pains, worms, edema and hay fever. It has been used internally in the treatment of dyspepsia connected with debility of the digestive organs, rheumatism, gout, inflammatory stages of auto-immune diseases, feverish illnesses, neuralgia and headache. Its tonic and astringent properties render it useful in convalescence from acute diseases, in treating worms, chronic dysentery and diarrhea. The fresh bark is very bitter and astringent. The salicin in it probably decomposes into salicylic acid in the human body. This is used as an anodyne and febrifuge. The glycosides are excreted in the urine as salicylic acid, salicyl alcohol, and related compounds; this renders the tea useful for urethra and bladder irritability, acting as an analgesic to those tissues. Most of our plants are not particularly potent and a fair amount of the bark or stem is needed. Up to an ounce a day can be consumed in tea if needed, but take no more than is
needed for the problem. Willow bark is a strong but benign antiseptic, and a good poultice or strong wash is made of the fresh or dried herb. For infected wounds, ulcerations, or eczema, the plant should be boiled in twice its volume of water in a covered pot for at least half an hour, some borax or boric acid added (tablespoon to a pint of water), and the tea used externally as often as necessary. It also may be taken as a bitter tonic in small doses before meals, to hasten convalescence from acute disease. The leaves are used internally in the treatment of minor feverish illnesses and colic. An infusion of the leaves has a calming effect and is helpful in the treatment of nervous insomnia. When added to the bath water, the infusion is of real benefit in relieving widespread rheumatism.

**Dosage:** 1-3 tsp of bark in 1 cup of water, soak for 2-5 hours, 1 cup daily, a mouthful at a time; standard decoction in formulas, 3-9 gms.

**Remedies:**

**Pain Relief Tea**
1 Tbsp raspberry leaves
1 tsp white willow bark
2 cups boiling water

Combine the above herbs and cover with the boiling water; steep for 30 minutes; strain. Take as needed, up to one cup a day

**Fever Relief Tea**
1 tsp Echinacea root
1 tsp white willow root
1 cup water

Combine the roots in a pan and cover with the water. Bring to a boil; reduce heat and simmer for 30 minutes; cool and stain. Take half a cup, up to four times a day.

**Pain Tea**
1 tsp chopped valerian root
2 tsp white willow bark
2 cups cold water

Combine the herbs in a pan and cover with the cold water. Soak overnight; strain. Take up to one cup a day, a tablespoon at a time. This tea can help relieve nerve pain (sciatica).

**Ritual Uses:** Gender: Cold. Planet: Moon. Element: Water. Associated Deities: Artemis, Ceres, Hecate, Persephone, Circe, Hera, Mercury, Belili, Belinus. Part Used: Branches. Basic Powers: Healing, Wishes. A wand made of willow is used in healing rituals. The willow is used as the binding on the witch’s broom. Called Tree of Enchantment in the language of the witches, it is more often used to bring the blessings of the Moon into ones life. Plant a willow in the garden, preferably by a natural spring or river. It will guard your home. The binding of the Witch’s Broom is often made of soft, pliant willow branches. Bear a sprig of this plant and you will be free of the fear of death. Tie a knot in a willow branch to serve as a physical representation of your intent for a spell. When the wish has been granted, untie the knot and then use again for a new spell.

**Other Uses:** The young stems are very flexible and are used in basket making. The plant is usually coppiced annually when grown for basket making, though it is possible to coppice it every two years if thick poles are required as uprights. The bark can be used for tying plants. A fiber obtained from the stems is used in making paper. The stems are harvested in spring or summer, the leaves are removed and the stems steamed until the fibers can be stripped. The fibers are cooked for 2 hours with lye and then beaten with mallets or put through a blender. The paper is red/brown in color. A fast growing tree and tolerant of maritime exposure, it can be grown as a shelterbelt. The wood is elastic, soft, easy to split, does not splinter. Used for construction, turnery, poles, tool handles etc. The wood is also used to make charcoal, which has medicinal uses.

**Culinary Uses:** Inner bark can be eaten raw or cooked. It can be dried, ground into a powder and added to cereal flour then used in making bread etc. A very bitter flavor, especially when fresh. It is used as a famine food when all else fails.
Leaves and young shoots - raw or cooked. Not very palatable. They are used only in times of scarcity. The leaves can be used as a tea substitute.

References:
Plants for a Future Database