

Growing Willy-nilly: the Grey Willow in Marin

by Charles Kennard

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Willows are perhaps California's best-known and loved trees, whether they are pussy-willows, weeping willows, corkscrew willows or streamside willows. They are widespread in Marin, especially along streams, and Sausalito was named after the tree—"sausalito" being Spanish for a little grove of willows.

Of the six species native to Marin, one (Scouler's) grows in moist woodlands, while the others are typically riparian and may be shrubby or tree-like in form. By far the most common one is arroyo willow, with its somewhat spoonshaped leaves that are dark and lustrous on the top and pale beneath.

The grey willow or sandbar willow (*Salix exigua*) is distinctive in having narrow, grey, silky leaves, and very flexible twigs, but is not common in Marin. It is usually shrubby and grows in extensive patches. It can be seen where Highway 101 crosses into Sonoma County at San Antonio Creek, at Nicasio Reservoir by the Petaluma Road intersection, at the Rich Readimix yard on lower Lagunitas Creek, and at a pond on Smith Ranch Road. It is reported to also grow at Olema Marsh.

Thanks to its supple shoots, grey willow is the traditional basket willow ("luma") of Marin's Coast Miwoks, who, however, in the late nineteenth century used to travel up to the Sebastopol and Healdsburg areas for the longer shoots available there. Very slim peeled sticks are bound with trimmed sedge roots to form fine coiled baskets. The very few extant early Coast Miwok baskets are now in museums scattered across the U.S. and Europe; they are decorated with minute olivella shell discs, feathers, and abalone shell pendants. Food-



Grey willow and cattail at Nicasio Reservoir. Photo by Charles Kennard.

gathering baskets were of twined willow or hazel, most likely winter-harvested and with the bark left on.

The Marin botanist's bible **Marin Flora** by John Thomas Howell, published in 1949, lists Ross as a location where grey willow has been found, and ten years ago there was still one growing by Lagunitas Road near Willow Avenue. I took a few cuttings to propagate it and, soon after, the mother tree (it was a female tree) died. Since then I have re-introduced clones of this willow to several sites in the Ross Valley where it can now be seen: at the upper end of Phoenix Lake (planted with the cooperation of Janet Klein of MMWD); at the



Willow and redbud basket by Charles Kennard

Marin Art and Garden Center; on Sleepy Hollow Creek at Friends' habitat restoration site at Drake High School; and at Friends' projects at White Hill School and on Olema Road in Fairfax.

Grey willow when in leaf presents an attractively delicate and cool silvery appearance, but is not a good garden willow unless contained, as, with ample water, it spreads vigorously from root suckers. If you live by a sunny section of creek and would like to plant this attractive and historic tree, contact Charles Kennard at Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed.

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