



White willow

A herb that giveth ease | *Celina Ainsworth, CHT, MH*

Most people who enjoy a leisurely stroll through lakeside parks are familiar with the willow tree. Its boughs weep gracefully toward the ground or dip languidly into nearby water. What people might not realize is that constituents found within willow bark have revolutionized pain management in modern medicine.

Long used as a traditional remedy for the treatment of fevers, arthritis, muscular aches, and other inflammatory conditions, white willow (*Salix alba*) is among our greatest herbal allies in the management of pain. How ironic that a tree with such supple branches can give ease to the pain of knotted, stiffened joints and aching muscles.

NATURE'S ASPIRIN

Before the invention of pharmaceutical drugs, willow's use as a medicine was relatively common. During the Middle Ages in Europe and Asia, extracts of willow bark were used to treat fevers and pain.

First Nation's peoples in North America have used various willow species for the purpose of healing. The Huron, Mohawk, Cree, Chippewa, and many other tribes use the bark and twigs for pain relief. The Cherokee make a tea using *Salix alba* to treat fevers, and the

What's in the name?

White willow (*Salix alba* L.) takes its botanical name from the Celtic word *sal*, meaning near, and *lis*, meaning water.

Blackfoot use the twigs of *Salix discolor*, or pussy willow, to ease pain and reduce fevers.

The medicinal use of willow has changed little over the centuries and today herbalists still administer simple teas and tinctures made from willow for the treatment of arthritis, tendonitis, painful menstruation, rheumatism, gout, backaches, and headaches.

WILLOW AND SALICIN

Modern research has given us an understanding of how willow exerts its therapeutic effect. The bark contains phenolic glycosides named salicylates, including salicin, which is responsible for the pain-relieving action. When ingested, salicin is hydrolyzed in the intestine to saligenin, which in turn is absorbed and then oxidized to the therapeutically active compound salicylic acid. This water-soluble compound inhibits prostaglandins, which induce inflammation, pain, and fever.

Salicylates were first isolated from willow by the French pharmacist Leroux in 1829. This gave rise to the eventual development of the drug Aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid) by the German company Bayer in 1899.

The natural salicylate compounds found in willow bark are structurally different from Aspirin, and willow extract will not inhibit blood clotting or irritate the stomach, side effects commonly associated with Aspirin.

Administered at a typical dose of between 1 to 3 g three times per day, willow is safe to use for several weeks at a time.

Fiddler's brew

You will find willow bark and the other herbs used in this pain-relieving tea at most health food shops and herbal dispensaries.

- 1 cup (250 mL) white willow bark (*Salix alba*)
- 1 cup (250 mL) meadowsweet herb (*Filipendula ulmaria*)
- 1 cup (250 mL) rose hips (*Rosa canina*)

Blend the herbs together and store in an airtight container in a dark place for up to 12 months.

To prepare, simmer 1 tsp (5 mL) of the blended herbs in 1 cup (250 mL) boiling water.

Steep 5 minutes and enjoy. Drink up to 3 cups per day.



Willow is certainly a giving herb. Numerous species have a long history of use as a safe and effective pain-relieving medicine. As is the case when using all of nature's healers, it is recommended that you consult with a trained herbalist or other complementary medicine practitioner before use. [a](#)

Faerie boughs

Children can make magical faerie boughs in spring using freshly cut willow branches.

Trim leafless boughs and place them in a jar of fresh water. After several days, the buds will begin to open and sprout leaves.

