



Willow Wranglers

Some see willows as a nuisance species. Others create works of art, garden structures or casual furniture.

BY MINDY KRALICEK PHOTOS BY MINDY KRALICEK AND RYK WEISS

“NO ONE’S EVER SAID NO

when we’ve asked if we can cut sand willow on their property,” says Pam Dennis sprightly. Her partner in life and art, Ryk Weiss, shakes his head in agreement.

Their passion with willow began when a friend visited about 30 years ago. He ran out of money and needed bus fare to get back home. He asked if he could cut some willow on their property to make and sell willow furniture. Weiss said, “Only if you show me how to do it.”

That was the start. Weiss built willow furniture for a while and Dennis branched off into basket-making. They sold their items at farmers’ markets.

Weaving Creativity

Their creativity got the better of them. Dennis began mixing mediums: willow with pottery and, later, copper. Weiss began replicating some of his early willow art in copper. They sold their work at juried art fairs around the country for 25 years, adapting their works to art trends.

As the textures of their art diversified, so did their lines of work. Dennis taught basket making at art centers. They got consignments for art installations at hospitals and colleges; Dennis has been a popular teacher for the Iowa Arts Council’s Arts in Education program. The installation of a willow whale at Reiman Gardens in Ames added to



BELOW: Workshop participants Aprile Kohler and Dawn Wolvek of Des Moines cut willow for their projects.
OPPOSITE: Baskets grown and crafted by Lee Zieke of Willowglen Nursery near Decorah.



A WHALE OF A WILLOW: The Moby Dick Garden Seascape sculpture displayed at Reiman Gardens at Iowa State University in Ames was created and installed by Pam Dennis and Ryk Weiss of Ogden.

their notoriety.

“The problem with living off your own work is that it ruins you for doing anything else,” says Weiss. The couple lives simply with a conservation ethic on an acreage north of Ogden in central Iowa. Found things become décor in the garden. Dennis, a horticulturist, tends their vegetable and flower gardens. Willow, indigenous and renewable, is an apt material for their art.

Willow Garden Structures

Lee Zieke in northeast Iowa also has a passion for willow. She and her husband, Lindsay Lee, live on a scenic acreage they call Willowglen between Decorah and Burr Oak, where they offer garden and landscape design services. In 1983 Zieke attended a willow basket-weaving class in Decorah offered by a Wisconsin man. “I knew before the class was over that this was something that was going to be a part of me for a long time,” says Zieke.

Zieke started weaving baskets using wild sand willow, but learned that Amana basket makers were growing their own willow for weaving from cuttings brought over from Germany. Zieke started researching European willows, which she learned were more pliable, did not root sucker (which is what makes sand willow so aggressive), and had distinctive colors. She planted her first European willow cuttings in 1988.

The Stick Merchant

Over the next four years, Zieke planted three patches of willow varieties—6,000 cuttings each time. Some of those patches are now 11 to 15 years old. Her willow patches have expanded into three acres of 10 varieties and sprouted a sideline business for Willowglen: selling cuttings across the country through their business website.

Zieke sells 6- to 8-foot willow rods to weavers, either dry or green, as well as larger-diameter willow that can be used for other purposes. Her willow cuttings are also

Artists Pam Dennis and Ryk Weiss at their studio in rural Ogden. Using 30 years of willow craft experience, the duo offer workshops, teach in schools and sell their popular art works. Weiss, a Humboldt native and musician, has a private recording studio in addition to his work with copper. Dennis has a horticulture background and was the first woman hired to tend the large rose garden behind the Des Moines Art Center in Greenwood Park. **BELOW:** The bird sculpture is made from willow with copper and ceramic accents.



PHOTO, LEFT, BY RYK WEISS





As folk art became fine art for Pam Dennis, this storage area shows a range of her willow and mixed media work. For workshops, or to buy art, call [515-275-2594](tel:515-275-2594).

Willow furniture making has a history rooted in folk art often associated with gypsies, who would camp and make furniture to use. Always on the go, they'd sell their furniture before departing and make new at their next destination.

used for decorative purposes in the home, and she sells cuttings for others to start willow patches.

“Willow is the perfect renewable source for garden structures. When I see ornaments, structures and supports made out of plastic and wire, I think, ‘How can I do this with willow?’” says Zieke.

Her garden structure ideas evolved into workshops and classes for willow plant supports and garden trellises, adding again to Willowglen’s list of services.

Of course, Zieke also continues to make custom-made baskets, which can also be ordered through the website. She prefers the traditional “stake and strand” construction which make her garden, shopping and laundry baskets strong and functional. 🐼



Flying bird design as part of the Moby Dick Garden Seascape at Reiman Gardens in Ames. Created by Pam Dennis and Ryk Weiss.



Artist and gardener Lee Zieke’s wattle fence was made by weaving willows with rebar. The rebar is buried up to three feet deep and extends six feet skyward. **RIGHT:** Readers can learn to build these trellises by taking a class from Zieke. She and husband Lindsay Lee offer landscaping and garden design, custom-made baskets, willow weaving classes and sell willow cuttings at their home in rural Decorah. Learn more at willowglennursery.com or 563-735-5570.

FAR RIGHT: Cut willow from various cultivars with varying color can be purchased for projects from Zieke.



WILLOW CUTTING ADVICE:

While willow can be harvested by cutting any time of year to make art projects, it is best cut during the colder months when lowered sap levels decrease brittleness. Remember the willow artist adage, "If it's sappy, it's snappy." The best time to cut willow is December through March.



Horses and Riders sculpture created and installed by Pam Dennis and Ryk Weiss on display at the Blanden Museum in Fort Dodge. The couple is incorporating metals and wire in their large, outdoor murals using willow techniques with long-lasting materials.

PHOTO BY RYK WEISS