

The Willow Artist

Basketmaker Lee Zieke feels like she was meant to make her life among the willows

By Carol Davis
Photography by Greg Latza



As Lee Zieke sat in a basket weaving class, learning how to craft tightly-woven baskets from pliable willow cuttings, she knew before the session ended that she had found her niche.

“I absolutely fell in love with it,” she recalls. “It felt like I was meant to do this.”

It would seem so. Nearly 20 years after that class, Lee not only still designs and creates all kinds of beautiful willow baskets and other items both for herself and to sell, but she raises, harvests, and sells willow, and teaches others the craft, from the northeastern Iowa rural home near Decorah that she shares with her husband, Lindsay Lee.

Their acreage, once home to a large plant nursery until the couple closed it to focus on garden and landscape design services, is dotted with Lee’s willow handiwork — a wattle fence along a vegetable garden, a walk-through arch in a large flower garden, and plant trellises placed throughout.

“The utilitarian notion that a gardener can grow a renewable source for garden fences and plant supports or baskets and sculpture appeals to my German and Dutch heritage,” Lee says.

Maybe she *was* meant to do this.

UNIQUE CROP

After learning to weave with willow, Lee spent several years harvesting the wild variety, which was abundant in the area around their scenic, hilly 50 acres.

“At first, I hunted willow along the river, along road ditches, and on field edges,” she says.

At the time, she and Lindsay were operating their Willowglen Nursery — so named years before because of the abundant willows on the property — where they raised and sold perennial flowers, woody shrubs, and trees.

What, then, about raising willow?

“The gardener in me said, ‘Why not grow my own?’” Lee says.

“There are farms in Europe where willow is the crop they grow.”

She ordered five different willow species and planted the 6,000 cuttings by hand.

“It was nuts,” she recalls with a laugh.

But it worked. Unlike wild willows, Lee’s cultivated willows don’t have root suckers that grow every which way, so they can be planted in tidy and easily-managed rows, much like any other crop.

“They’re like shrubs,” she says. “I can cut them down to the ground, then they will grow nice and straight, which is what I want.”

Her 3 acres of willow patches vary in height. Some have been recently planted, while others measure upward of 8 feet, awaiting harvesting.

It’s an easy crop to grow, Lee says. “Willows want to root,” she says. “When you’re ready to plant, you put it in the ground so only 1 inch of the cutting shows. There’s no root; it’s just a stick.”

“You water and wait and pretty soon it will send up a shoot,” she says.

She’s experimented with several



Lee and her husband, Lindsay, closed their plant nursery business to focus on providing landscape design services.

varieties over the years for different colors, sizes, and textures. “The subtleties of the different colors are kind of fun to work with,” she says.

She uses yellow willow, for example, but only sparingly. “I use it for accents on my baskets, so I don’t grow much of it,” she says.

At one point, she was growing 45 different willow species. Now, though, she raises around a dozen different varieties.

“I’ve grown enough over the years to know what works for me,” she says.

She’s curious about working with different kinds of willow, so she still buys and tries new varieties. Last year, she introduced three new kinds to one of her willow patches.

Lee harvests her willow branches in the fall, usually between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and separates them according to size. She and Lindsay tie them into bundles and store them for six months, allowing them to dry completely.

Their pliability can be restored later, when she or her customers are ready to use them, by soaking them in water.

BEAUTIFUL BASKETS

As much as Lee enjoys growing willow, the real magic happens when she begins to fashion a basket. With her skillful hands, a pile of sticks begins to take shape, creating a vessel unlike any other that will become a piece of décor or a useful utensil.

“I like to make big baskets that you can take to the farmers’ market or use to haul in food from the garden,” she says.

She makes two kinds of baskets: the rib-style, which is sometimes referred to as a traditional-styled egg basket, or Appalachian style; and the stake and strand.

“With the rib style, you start with the rim piece and, as you weave, you add ribs,” building it



Lee is accomplished in several kinds of basket weaving, but she prefers the stake and strand technique.

out from the sides, she says. “The weave is over, under, over, under.”

Stake and strand is a European-style basket that consists of the stakes, which are the stationary structural rods, or “skeleton” of the basket, and strand, which is the material woven between the stakes one row at a time.

“You make a base first,” Lee explains. “Then you insert sticks in the base and fold them up so they become upright. You then weave among those uprights.”

Stake and strand baskets also have a foot, or rim, on the bottom, which elevates the base. “The foot takes the wear and tear so it doesn’t wear the bottom of the basket,” Lee says.

Lee prefers making stake and

strand baskets. “With the stake and strand, you have lots of different weaves you can do,” she says. “There are lots of choices. You can have round, oval, or square baskets.”

The large workshop she shares with Lindsay, a birch carver, is proof of that variety. Baskets of all shapes, sizes, color variations, and styles hang from ceiling beams, ready for a buyer.

And baskets of various stages of completion are grouped on a table from a class that Lee led the previous evening.

IN THE GARDEN

As beautiful as her baskets are, Lee does much more with willow, creating functional and decorative

structures for her and Lindsay’s colorful perennial gardens.

She suggests getting started with willow by making your own garden elements, such as:

Wattle fencing — Wattle fences are made by weaving willow, or any kind of flexible green sapling wood, between upright posts. The posts should be made of cedar or another rot-resistant wood so they don’t decompose and break off at the soil level.

Garden wickets — Lee bends pliable 3-foot shoots into an arch and sticks each end in the ground. You can place these end to end, but it’s more interesting if you overlap the ends. Wickets make good garden borders.

Plant supports — Take two small pieces of willow, bend them into arches and stick each end into the ground a few inches apart, side by side. Take two more pieces and bend them over and perpendicular to the first two, so that a square is formed in the middle.

“This provides protection when the plant is small,” Lee says. “Then the plant can grow up through it and use it for support.”

Trellises — Lash large willow shoots together vertically and horizontally, making sure to leave enough length at one end to “plant” the trellis into the ground, to create natural-looking trellises for flowers and vegetables.

‘IT JUST MAKES SENSE’

Perhaps it was a sign of things to come when Lee and Lindsay moved to Decorah from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1981 and bought their home among the willows four years later.



In the large workshop she shares with Lindsay, Lee displays her baskets of all shapes, sizes, color variations, and styles.

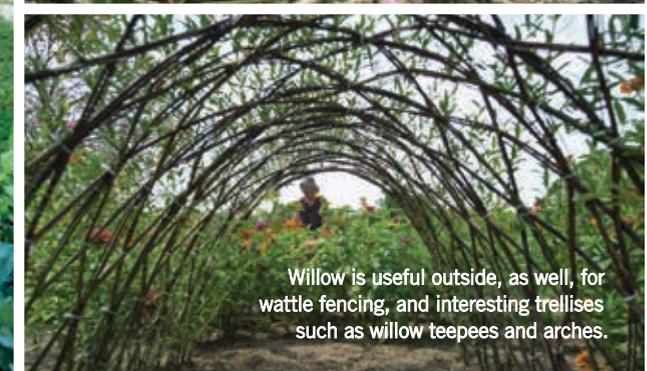
“We named it Willowglen because we lived in a willow glen,” she says. “It just makes sense that we ended up working with willow.”

Kind of like she *was* meant to do this. ★

Out Here editor Carol Davis is drying some willow to make a wattle fence for her garden.

MORE WILLOW ART

See more of Lee Zieke’s willow creations and her home at Willowglen by visiting TractorSupply.com/OutHere.



Willow is useful outside, as well, for wattle fencing, and interesting trellises such as willow teepees and arches.