

WILLOWS – *Salix* species

No matter where you are in the Northwest Territories, chances are you'll find at least one kind of willow growing nearby. Nearly 50 different species grow across the NWT, from the wettest bog, to the driest pine forest, to the coldest windswept tundra. Willows are very hardy, very diverse, and very hard to tell apart. With careful observation and study, expert botanists may be able to distinguish different species; for the rest of us, they are all "willow".

Try this: Pick some willow leaf buds in the spring, just when they start to turn green. Serve with milk and sugar, like cereal. You'll have a healthy breakfast that is 7 – 10 times richer in vitamin C than an orange!

HUMAN USES

Traditional

- Twigs used for baskets, bows, looms for bead-weaving, sticks for roasting meat, frames for drying pelts, pipes, whistles, canoe ribs, emergency snowshoes, and hoops for Dene ring-toss game
- Bark strips twisted to make cord for fish net, rope, snares and dog collars
- Rotted wood burned for smoking hides; green branches burned for smoking meat
- Burned, powdered bark treats infected wounds and ulcers
- Bark and/or roots treat stomach problems, relieve pain, promote healing, reduce fever
- Tender inner bark is a traditional food

Commercial

- Woven baskets and garden structures
- Planted as a soil stabilizer for erosion control

WILDLIFE USES

- Essential food for moose, ptarmigan, caribou, snowshoe hare, small rodents, beaver, and bear
- Moose depend on willow shrublands for winter food and shelter
- Thickets provide bedding and cover for many species of wildlife

FROM A DISTANCE

- Grow along streams, or where soil is moist
- One of the few woody plants to survive in tundra
- Range from ground-hugging mats, to dense knee-high thickets, to tall spindly trees
- Shrubs have multiple tall, straight, flexible stems that sprout from the base

UP CLOSE

Leaves

- Long and narrow (vary in width), pointed at both ends
- Arranged alternately on the branch
- Leaf buds covered by a single smooth scale

Catkins

- Individual trees have either male or female catkins
- Appear in spring before the leaves
- Male catkins often "furry" "pussy willows" that open to show stamens covered with red or yellow pollen

Bark

- Dark brown, red, orange, green, yellow

