

WILLOW

SCIENTIFIC NAME: SALIX SPP.



SPECIES OVERVIEW

Alberta has a variety of willow species, including beaked willow (*Salix bebbiana*), sandbar willow (*Salix exigua*), and yellow willow (*Salix lutea*). Natural hybridization and environmental adaptation can make identifying individual *Salix* species difficult. Willows as a group have been observed as having qualities that are highly beneficial to a multitude of different environmental conditions across the province.

Willows in general are a water loving species, demonstrating a high-level ability to purge flooded lands of excess water, through absorption. Their provision of wildlife habitat, food resources, erosion control, and healthy hydrology, also lends further to the notion that willows are and shall continue to be a fundamental presence in many healthy landscapes. Additionally, their absence or removal could directly disrupt the aforementioned health and well-being of such areas. Willows are an extremely versatile group, and genetics will vary from region to region, with adaptations for each subspecies flawlessly reflecting the area they are acutely native to.



CULTURAL VALUE

Willows are a diverse and exciting subspecies group which are a brilliant showcase of cultural importance in native flora. Multiple Indigenous communities utilize these species for various purposes, including food, clothing, and medicine.

Bodies of water represent regions of the land that are sacred to Canada's First Nations people. The health of the shoreline and its riparian plants directly influence the health of water bodies. Riparian areas are often densely populated by willow species that provide shade and erosion reduction that can lead to flood prevention and ecological productivity. Additionally, willow branches overhanging watercourses provide shade, which helps keep water temperatures lower and provides important cover for fish species.

'Black diamond willow' is one occurrence that showcases such uses. When certain plains willow species become infected with the fungus (*Haploporus odorus*), the bark begins to exhibit a beautiful diamond pattern that has been (and continues to be) sought after by First Nations peoples for smudging, headache and earache treatment, mosquito repellent and for bows and lodging, due to the flexible nature of the branches. The fungus has also been revered in the treatment of symptoms of anxiety in First Nation communities.

These are just a few of the pursuits First Nations communities employ uninfected and black diamond willow for. As has been demonstrated, willow species represent a vital fragment in the cultural mosaic of our Indigenous communities. Due to the pliable nature of willow wood, there are many potential uses for the portions harvested by Indigenous peoples with the uses ranging from baskets to furniture craftsmanship.



REFERENCES

Nunavut - willow (possible candidate). Tree Canada. (2022, December 15). <https://treecanada.ca/resources/canadas-arboreal-emblems/willow/>

Raven My Eco Action. (2024, January 1). *Diamond Willow fungus*. MY Eco Action. <https://ravenmyecoaction.tumblr.com/post/625151371190190080/diamond-willow-fungus/amp>

Diamond Willow fungus - a hidden gem of the Forest. Peace Valley Foragers. (n.d.). <https://www.peacevalleyforagers.ca/diamond-willow-fungus>