



Guidelines for Maintaining Living Willow Structures

Living willow structures can make a lovely feature in any garden or school playground, and one of the most interesting designs is the willow dome. These can be used as a den or even an outdoor learning space, providing a shady shelter for school children once they are in full leaf.

As these are living structures which grow in the same way as a tree, they do require a certain amount of looking after each year to ensure that the shape of the dome is maintained and kept to a manageable size.

Management Tips

Once constructed, the dome can be left for the first couple of months of spring with very little or no maintenance as the willow rods are only starting to grow again at this time.

Keep weeds and long grass away from around the dome, although this should not be a major problem due to the weed-matting and bark-chip base. It is best to weed by hand as any strimmer-use may damage the bark of the willow and eventually kill it.

If there is a prolonged dry period of weather for a couple of weeks, it may be a good idea to give the dome a good soak around the base until it starts to grow and produce leaves.

As the months progress to the end of term in June, the dome will produce leaves and new shoots. The shoots will probably not require any pruning or weaving at this stage, but as the dome will probably be left unattended over the school summer holidays, there will be a lot of new growth from side shoots come September.

The shoots can be woven in between the existing rods to help thicken up the dome, but pruning should be left until autumn, (October at earliest) once the willow has gone dormant again.

Any new growth can be woven in after October, however some shoots may be too long for this and can be pruned instead. A ladder may be required to reach the top of the dome although it may be easier to reach through from inside the structure.

Any new rods that are cut in autumn can be replanted into the base of the structure just by pushing the cut rod directly into the ground and weaving in, helping to strengthen the dome.

This process can be repeated in following years, although it is best not to overplant the structure with new cuttings.

If there is suitable space, any excess rods can be cut into 12" rods and replanted to create a willow bed for other weaving projects.