

THE CULTIVATION OF THE WILLOW OR OSIER, PART 1

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The cultivation of the willow or osier, Part 1 by William Scaling

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WILLIAM SCALING

**THE CULTIVATION
OF THE WILLOW OR
OSIER, PART 1**

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THE
CULTIVATION
OF THE
WILLOW OR OSIER.

IN A SERIES OF PAPERS

BY

WILLIAM SCALING,

Ten Years Basket Maker to Her Majesty and the Royal Family.

PART I.

PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR PLANTING AND CULTURE.

"We pass a gulf in which the willows dip
Their pendant boughs, stooping as if to drink."—*COWPER.*

LONDON:

W. KENT AND CO., PATERNOSTER ROW:

NOTTINGHAM: R. ALLEN AND SON, CANTON HOUSE, LONG ROW.

1868.

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NOTE.

The only object of the writer in these pages is, to enable any one unacquainted with the cultivation of willows (for basket making purposes) to grow them successfully. A Botanical description of all the known varieties of willow, would occupy ten times the present space, without being of any practical value to the cultivator.

ON THE
CULTIVATION OF THE WILLOW.

Perhaps no production of this country is so little understood as the cultivation of the Osier or Willow. Botanically, the *Salix* has been fully described by several eminent men, who have devoted years to its study; but no one having a practical knowledge of the uses of the osier, combined with experience as a cultivator, has given us any information upon the subject.

Mr. Phillips, Mr. Sherriff, and others have treated the subject as amateur cultivators, and have done good service by introducing one or two varieties of good basket willows. To Mr. Phillips, especially, is due the merit of first bringing into notice a really good variety, viz., the Brown Norfolk, or *Salix Triandra*. For certain uses this is now the best willow known, although more subject to disease than some other and more lately introduced kinds. But here Mr. Phillips, from the want of experience as a worker in the

material, falls into error, and supposes that because this variety is a really good willow, it is good alike for all the purposes of the basket maker. Nothing can be wider of the mark: the *Salix Triandra* is a very unsuitable kind for a great part of the basket work made in England. There are twelve or fourteen other varieties equally as good and useful, and alike profitable to the cultivator.

With the progress of trade, demands have sprung up for a different class of willow, and the old style of culture no longer serves. Size of shoots can readily be obtained by planting willows of quick growth in suitable land; but finer kinds, and of better quality, possessing certain properties, are in demand, and require special treatment. It is difficult to ascertain, with any degree of accuracy, the quantity of land planted in Great Britain with the Basket Willow, owing to the great number of small patches scattered about; but taking the opinion of others in the trade, in conjunction with my own knowledge of the willow producing districts, I estimate the land under cultivation as Willow or Osier Holts, in Great Britain and Ireland, at 6,500 to 7,000 acres, exclusive of Willow Spinneys and Plantations for farmers' purposes; this, however, does not supply the requirements of the trade. In 1866 we imported, chiefly from France, Belgium, Holland, and Prussia, 4,400 tons, of the estimated value of £43,609, and baskets of the value of £45,840; and as the demand is gradually increasing, by the extension of trade, the cultivator of willows is not likely to overstock the market for some time to come.

The best Basket Willows imported, are from France and

Belgium—and the worst from Holland. The kinds generally grown in Holland are *Salix Alba*, *Salix Viminalis*, and *Salix Decipiens*, all rapid growers, but deficient in the qualities esteemed by the basket maker, and are therefore sold at a much lower price than any other willows, either of home or foreign growth; they are very suitable for hoops for coopers, of which article Holland exports large quantities.

There is a very widely spread, but erroneous opinion, that willows will only grow in wet, boggy ground; and, that as an article of produce they are not worth the attention of the cultivator. With ordinary care a willow crop will pay the grower as well as any crop on the farm, and with this advantage, that land comparatively valueless for root or grain crops, can be used for osier plantations. To grow willows successfully there must be an adaptation of the variety to the soil; if this is not attended to, either the crop will be a failure, or the produce will be deficient in the qualities most sought after; the following rule may serve to guide intending planters. All the varieties of the soft wood class—technically known in the trade as osiers—will grow in a much damper soil than the hard wooded, generally called fine tops. The present market price of green willows ranges from two to five pounds, and of peeled willows from nine to twenty-five pounds per ton. This wide range in value shews the necessity of exercising care in selecting suitable kinds for planting, and of planting each variety in the soil best adapted to its requirements. The following properties must be sought after for willows in-

tended to be used in the green or brown state:—1st, toughness; 2nd, level surface; 3rd, full top; 4th, wood soft; 5th, remain a light brown colour when dry; 6th, a good cropper. For willows intended to be used in the peeled state, the undermentioned qualities are necessary in order to realize the best market price:—1st, toughness; 2nd, elasticity; 3rd, level and smooth surface when peeled; 4th, peel a good colour for either white or buff; 5th, split well, and make good scains; 6th, great length of shoot in proportion to thickness; 7th, small quantity of pith; 8th, hardy and not liable to ordinary diseases; 9th, a tendency to grow straight, and clear of side shoots; 10th, a good cropper.

As a rule, willows are tougher when grown on strong loam inclining to clay, than on any other soil; but some of them, as the *Salix Helix*, or Rose Willow, a vigorous plant on lighter soil or warp land, becomes a mere scrubby shrub when planted on clay. The varieties of willow are extremely numerous: Dr. Host, of Vienna, is said to have cultivated over 300 sorts; and His Grace the Duke of Bedford, at Woburn Abbey, about 250 sorts.

There are also extensive collections in the Botanic Gardens at Gottingen, Bremen, Erlangen, and Berlin. The chief object in those famous Salictums has been more to study their botanical peculiarities, than to develop useful varieties for the requirements of manufacturers. This remark is not made with the view of disparaging the labours of those gentlemen who have spent so much valuable time on the subject, but to show that the willow has not received

the attention of scientific men, as an article of commerce, to any considerable extent; and that a large field is open to the practical culturist.

One of the first things to be observed in forming an osier plantation, is to drain it of all stagnant or surplus water, as no Basket Willows will arrive at perfection in land saturated with moisture. It must also be well pulverized or prepared to a depth of 12 or 13 inches, and thoroughly cleared of weeds; and, if poor, well manured before planting. If it is strong, cold land, lime may be used with advantage; but if lime is applied to extirpate the weeds on light land, the crop of osiers will be scabbed or cankered. If possible avoid open drains, and throwing the land into beds; where drains are required use pipes, as open drains would interfere very much with the economical working of the land afterwards. If the land is well cleaned and properly prepared, much after expense will be spared, and better crops will be obtained. The opposite course would be false economy.

Much difference of opinion exists amongst growers as to the size and age of cuttings; the distance between the plants; how far it is necessary to push them into the soil; and how far to leave them out or above the ground. I have very carefully examined the various methods—have tried and experimented upon them—and find the following plan to be the best, producing the heaviest crops, best quality, more easily, and consequently more cheaply cleaned, the least exhaustive of the soil, and if it is desirable to change it to ordinary arable land again, it can be done