

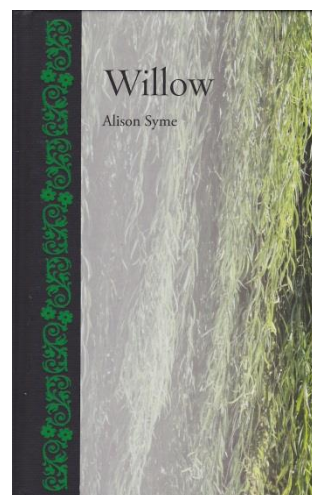


## Book Review

Published on line: 31 March 2015

**Willow. Alison Syme. Reaktion Books, London. 2014. ISBN 978-1-78023-292-8. 239 pages, 123 illustrations. £16.**

*Willow* is not a technical approach to the genus *Salix* and its related groups. In fact, species names are used rarely in this work and only to illustrate a point. This is an ethnobotanical look at willows across time, cultures and genres. The five main sections deal with the uses and meanings of willow as plant, structural uses of willow branches, willow-patterned china, willow in literature and willow in art. At the back of the book there is a helpful timeline to put the topics discussed in different sections into a unified chronological order as well as an extensive section of notes and references for further reading.



While the book covers ancient beliefs and uses that most of us are familiar with, such as willow bark for medicine, Syme also draws on modern uses and meanings that might have passed us by if we were not looking. She points out how authors of recent popular works, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the *Harry Potter* series, draw on the symbolism of willows just as ancient Egyptians and Romans did. The beauty of this book for me lies in the way that all the exposure we have to everyday objects and works, such as willow-patterned china, books (like *The Wind in the Willows*), films (like *The Wicker Man*) and even wicker furniture can be put into a larger historical context. We can see characters and objects in a different light when we understand the use of willows and willow imagery as a deliberate choice to convey certain elements associated with this plant. Syme also demonstrates where the mystery surrounding willows and willow related objects has gone too far and provides the evidence to debunk commonly held willow myths.

One doesn't realize how many references there are to willows in our history and culture until one starts looking for them, and then they pop up everywhere, for example in Shakespeare, the French Revolution, Monet's paintings and so on. Syme also looks at the way non-western cultures, such as China and Japan, use and depict willows in art and literature,

sometimes similar to the west, sometimes in exotic and unfamiliar ways. After reading this book I can never look at a basket or tombstone in the same way.

Heather L. Lindon, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Email: [h.lindon@kew.org](mailto:h.lindon@kew.org)