

For adults and children in the garden or outdoor space

Making a living den

Natural England wants to give a million children the chance to discover the outdoors. The natural world is a fascinating place to explore and our natural habitats together with the creatures and plants that live there can provide endless sources of fun. From your own back yard to the wilds of our national nature reserves, now is the time to make the most of the outdoors and go wild!

Together with Fiona Danks and Jo Schofield (www.goingwild.net), authors of Nature's Playground, Go Wild and Make it Wild (www.franceslincoln.com), we've produced these fantastic activity sheets to give you plenty of ideas of what you can get up to, what are you waiting for?



Many school gardens have large willow domes in their school grounds, providing a wonderful living play space as well as an attractive feature and a wildlife habitat. Constructing domes, tunnels, living willow “fedges” or even a willow maze is a project everyone can have a go at.

What you need

A local source of long straight rods of bendy willow – preferably cut from within the school wildlife area, or your garden if you happen to have willow, or try contacting a local farmer or a park manager who might be cutting back some willow and be able to spare a few rods. Alternatively, order willow from a specialist nursery, some of which will even supply willow-weaving instructions. Use the willow within a week of being cut. Avoid crack willow or weeping willow, but any other variety is suitable.





Making a willow dome

- Choose a site – Willow structures will grow more or less anywhere but prefer moist soil and an open site with plenty of light. The roots are pretty invasive, so don't plant over drains, underground pipes or near buildings or walls.
- Decide how large you want your shelter to be; this will depend on the length of the willow and how much space you have. The willow should be long enough to bend right over so that it almost touches the ground on the other side of the dome, as illustrated. Mark a circle on the ground and decide where you want the entrance to be.
- If the soil is very poor, dig a trench in a circle and line it with manure or compost to ensure your willow growth gets off to a good start.
- Push the willow rods into the ground at even intervals around the circle, remembering to leave a gap for the entrance. To provide stability and increase the chance of successful rooting, push each rod down to about 9-12 inches/22-30cm. The whole job is easier if the ground is soft – so try to choose a day just after it has rained.
- Match a willow rod with another one on the opposite side of the circle, and bend them over towards each other. Tie them together with long strips of inner tube or

natural cordage such as honeysuckle or ivy stems. Carry on doing this all the way around the circle until you have created a dome. Interweaving the rods at the top will increase stability.

- Now take some smaller willow rods. Push one in beside each of the larger rods, and then bend them over at an angle around the outside of the dome to make a lattice effect. Tie them in position. Keep doing this until you have worked all the way around the dome. This dome has two smaller willow lengths beside each upright, to make a denser lattice. Try to make it symmetrical.

Looking after willow structures

Maintenance is very important if you want a healthy and vigorous willow structure.

- Water the plants occasionally, especially if the first summer is very dry.
- Weed around the base of the plants if need be; covering the ground around the dome with a mulch of woodchips or some other natural material will suppress weeds.
- Weave new growth back into the structure to fill in gaps and add strength.
- Willow grows very quickly – you will need to cut it back each year.

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Safety tips

- Don't let very young children use sharp tools
- Children using knives or secateurs should be supervised at all times