

# Coastal Plain Willow

*Salix caroliniana*

The Coastal Plain Willow is native to the United States. It is the only willow that occurs naturally in South Florida, and it is the most common willow in the entire state.

Coastal Plain Willow is a common small to medium sized wetland tree found in swamps, along ditches, at the edges of ponds and marshes, and at the ocean in depressions between dunes. The genus name, *Salix*, is derived from two Celtic words meaning “near water.”

It is a sturdy and well-anchored tree that has a long life span relative to most other plant species. It is a rapid grower, maturing in around 20 years with a height of around 30 feet.

Coastal Plain Willow provides significant cover and some food for wild life. It is the only native larval host plant for Viceroy butterflies. According to *Butterflies of Eastern North America*, the Coastal Plain Willow is host to 111 different species of butterflies and moths, and it hosts a variety of other species.

Willow-hosted insects are an important part of Corkscrew’s education programs. A



Corkscrew Elementary student, *above*, studies a Cottonwood Leaf Beetle whose entire life cycle occurs on the willow, during an Insect Adventure field trip. A group of 4H students, *right*, examine and photograph willow wildlife for their projects during a different field trip.

Other wildlife, especially deer, eat willow twigs, buds, and leaves.

Although deciduous, willows in Southwest Florida barely lose their leaves in December before the catkin inflorescences appear and the new crop of leaves burst forth. Its most active growth period is in the spring.

The many long, narrow leaves are



arranged on spindly branches.

Leaves have a silvery white, waxy coating on the underside.

Separate male and female trees bear somewhat inconspicuous flowers in catkins (inset photo above) in mid-spring. Flowers on the female trees mature to clusters of small pods which open to reveal white, silk-tipped seeds which are then dispersed by the wind.

Although it is a wetland tree, it does have medium tolerance to drought, and like most hardwood species, willows are capable of sprouting back after fire.



People have utilized the Coastal Plain Willow in a myriad of ways.

The inner bark and leaves of many willows, including the Coastal Plain Willow, yields the medicinal extract salicin (salicylic acid). This chemical is the active ingredient in common aspirin, and chewing a leaf provides the familiar taste of aspirin. Native Americans chewed or boiled tea from the leaves and inner bark of this medicinal tree to relieve fever and minor pain from toothache, arthritis, and headache. One of the willow’s local nicknames around the Okefenokee is the “toothache tree.”

Native Americans used the willow to treat a variety of other ills. An inner bark concoction was used for colds, fever, diarrhea and dysentery.

Native Americans fashioned the inner bark into ropes, bags, and fish nets. Willow branches also provided straight and sturdy shafts for making arrows.

Twigs of willow, known as osiers, are still woven into baskets and wicker furniture.

The reddish brown wood breaks down rapidly when in contact with the soil, providing ready nutrients for other plants that grow in sandy soils.

Although soft and too weak for structural framing, the wood resists splitting. At one time it was a top choice for artificial limbs. Pioneers turned willow wood into charcoal, which they ground fine and used as a component in gunpowder. The long, flexible branches are used for making willow chairs and tables.

In an article on creating a rain garden to conserve and recycle water, *Audubon Magazine* recommended the Coastal Plain Willow as one of 13 trees and shrubs to plant (“Good to the Last Drop,” *Audubon*, September 2003).