

Pussy Willow

Salix discolor

Like all plants in the *Salix* or willow genus, Pussy Willows are dioecious (separate male and female plants). It is the male plants that have the beloved silky, pearl gray catkins that resemble a cat's paw. The female plants produce smaller, greenish catkins that mature into 1/3" long seed capsules. These capsules later split to release many tiny seeds with cottony hairs that are dispersed by wind and water.



Native to Canada and roughly the northern half of the United States, the Pussy Willow is a multi-stemmed shrub or small tree, 15-25 feet tall, with spreading upright stems. The bark is slightly fissured. Year-old twigs are hairy but become smooth with age. The leaves of the Pussy willow are alternate, elliptic in shape, up to 5" long, with irregular teeth. The Latin name "*discolor*" refers to the contrasting colors of the leaf surfaces: shiny green on top and blue-green below, which aid in recognition.

Pussy willows occur along shorelines, swamp margins and poorly drained thickets in a variety of soils as long as they're wet. Preferring full to part-sun, Pussy willows will tolerate flooding and fire, often occurring in abundance in the shrub-dominated successional stage after fires.

Fast-growing and short-lived, Pussy willows have not always been considered as beneficial. The wood is weak and easily damaged by ice and wind. The leaf/branch litter is "messy." In moist soils, Pussy willows will produce extensive shallow root systems that can clog pipes, drains and septic fields.

However, the wildlife value of Pussy willows (and other native willows) is very high. Pussy willows are recognized by pollination ecologists as of special value to native bees, bumble bees, and honey bees; because the sugar content of the nectar is high, and the plant provides the first and therefore important forage for bees in early spring. Willows, in general, run a close second to oaks as host plants for Lepidoptera species –the genus that includes moths and butterflies. Pussy Willows, in particular, are larval host plants for Mourning Cloaks (*Nymphalis antiopa*) and Viceroy (*Limenitis archippus*). Its pollen and nectar attracts many other butterfly species as well as flies, ants and beetles.

The leaves, buds, and branches of Pussy willows are eaten by many animals including deer, moose, caribou, rabbits, squirrel, beaver, muskrats, ruffed grouse, ducks, and small rodents. Pussy willows also provide valuable cover for wildlife and are favored for nesting by American goldfinch.

Pussy willows are useful for ecological restoration projects and erosion control, and can be used in landscaping if properly sited and pruned. They root so readily that cut branches can simply be inserted into moist soil in summer. There are reports of Pussy willows used as fence posts that rooted and grew into trees!

For more information and photos:

<https://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=SADI>

<http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/shrub/saldis/all.html>

http://landscaping.about.com/cs/hedgesfences/a/pussy_willows.htm

I know a little pussy.

Her coat is silver grey.

She lives out in meadow,

So very far away.

She'll always be a pussy.

She'll never be a cat.

'Cause she's a pussy willow.

Now what do you think of that?