1. Creating a willow tunnel

Willow is a fast growing, flexible material which is perfect for creating a variety of different structures, either living or non living, that can provide unusual focal points or practical spaces in any open space. There are many species of willow available, some with slender stems, in a variety of colours are used for intricate weaving & basketmaking, while others provide long, thick stems suitable for heavy weaving & outdoor living structures.

Willow Tunnel - Tools required. (*Optional)

15m tape measure (or similar) – Secateurs – Loppers* – String or garden twine – Single use and / or reusable cable ties* – Spade – Weed suppressant sheeting* - 3 bolts heavy willow (3 x 25 stems Salix viminalis or similar)

1. It is useful to dig a shallow trench, approximately 12” wide on either side and for the length of the tunnel, to minimise competition from weeds and more vigorous grasses. This can be dug over & filled with a layer of compost or simply slice a layer of turf off, turn it over and place it back in the trench. (Weed suppressant sheeting could also be used).

2. Continue the trench for the length of the tunnel (short trench shown here for example purposes) then take the bolt of thickest & longest willow rods and lay them out on the ground. Generally, the spacings between uprights for a 12’ tunnel would normally be about 1’ apart, so 13 uprights would be required for each side of the tunnel. Once the trench is complete you can start to plant the uprights.

3. For best results, willow stems pushed into the ground to between 4” & 6” and left to stand upright. If needed, twist the willow round so it is as upright as possible and bending towards the upright on the other side.
4. Note the stems on either side which are not facing inwards. These would be twisted around. Once the trench is complete and the uprights are correctly spaced, you can start to tie in the uprights.

5. Meeting the stems in the middle, you can then twist each side over the opposite upright, to create a rough arch. This is where cable ties are very useful and can be attached to the highest central part to hold the shape.

6. The two end archways can vary in height but it is best to keep the others to a similar height. This can either be done when each archway is joined or by pushing / lifting the stems when all arches are joined.

7. Note the lower height of the entrance arch and that none of the willow ends have been tied in yet, just twisted in.
8. At this stage, the thin ends of the twisted in willow should be fastened to the uprights, either by cable ties or string. If using cable ties, these can be snipped off close to the fastening so no hazards are left. It may be better to use a single use cable tie at the top of the arch and removable cable ties at either side which can be replaced by string once the tunnel is completed.

9. Note this photo is taken before the ends were tied in. This illustrates how the arches have moved out of line since being woven together and this is solved by the following:

10. Taking your second bolt of willow and working from the bottom of the uprights, carefully weave a single stem through the uprights, following the behind – in front – behind – in front pattern.

11. It is a good idea not to have the butt end (thick end) sticking out at the entrance in case it causes a hazard. Try to leave enough of the tip so it can be woven back on itself through the first four uprights or so. A further option to solve this problem is to push the butt end into the ground at each entrance end, before weaving through the structure. These stems should also grow and can be woven in to the structure by the first or second summer.

12. You may need to repeat this step at the other end as the stems may not be long enough to do this in one go. Don’t worry about neatness, as long as you can feel the tunnel becoming more solid. This step can be repeated as many times as you wish for a more visual effect. Once you have done the same on the other side of the tunnel it is time to move on to the central strengthening stems.
13. Do the same, with a single stem, roughly 2-3’ higher than the lower stems, to bring the uprights into line. It would be useful to tie these as you go along and ensure that the spacings are consistent. Removable cable ties are useful for this until they can be tied.

14. These horizontal stems can be repeated and even include the very top of the tunnel if required. The more horizontal levels used, the more structure the tunnel will have.

15. Once all the horizontal stems are in place and tied up, you can start adding the angled uprights. These should be pushed in the ground along the length of the tunnel, noting the spacing shown below. This is so, if required, opposite stems can also be added facing the other way.
16. The angled uprights would then be woven in as shown, along the length of the tunnel and tied either now or later.

17. Now the willow tunnel is nearly complete, spend some time to tie any loose ends, particularly where any stem touches or crosses an upright. If these are tied now, the tunnel will retain a solid structure, which will then be enhanced by the first seasons growth. Any new growth can be either cut in late autumn or woven in during the summer to create a thicker fuller effect.

18. Both entrances can be further enhanced by adding more uprights and creating further archways very close to the end archway. These can either be freestanding or woven around the existing archway.

19. Once everything has been tied, the last step is to give the tunnel a good watering, making sure that all the uprights have been soaked. For this, it is sometimes better to leave a trench rather than replace the turfs as a bucket of water down each trench is usually sufficient. After this, keep a check that all stems appear green and healthy and have sufficient water, then wait for the first growth to appear in spring and enjoy!