

Do-it-yourself twig chair

Add a rustic touch to your backyard with this chair made from willow branches.

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Photography by Brock May



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Cochrane and Anne Roberts, creators of internationally acclaimed willow structures, hold workshops on building classic willow furniture. It's an intense weekend of work, but the end result is a chair that you will cherish for many years to come.

Follow these instructions to make a rustic willow chair of your own.

Tips:

- Work with a partner.
- To avoid splitting wood, [drill pilot holes](#) and drive nails in at a slight angle.
- You can harvest willow twigs and shoots along streams, rivers and lakes. Pussy willow is what you're looking for; weeping willow, a tree, is too brittle to use.
- Choose straight, pliable twigs without gnarls that range from 3/4 to 2-1/2 inches in diameter.
- To prevent damage to plants, cut twigs by pruning shrubs or trees (be careful not to pull or cut out the roots).
- Collect extra twigs in case you break some, and store them in a bucket of water until ready to use.
- Cut twigs only after you have the permission of property owners.

You need:

- Galvanized framing nails, 2-1/2 to 4 in
- Finishing nails, 1 in and 1-5/8 in, for armrests, headrest, seat/back
- Measuring tape
- Small bow saw, rasp and hammer
- [Garden shears and 2-handed pruning shears](#)

- Cordless drill, selection of bits
- Bristle paintbrush
- Linseed oil, turpentine

To make:

1. Using small bow saw or pruning shears, cut shoots to length, as described in [cutting chart](#).
2. To make sides: On work table lay out side beams and front and back legs. Using corner of table as a square, position 1 back leg on table parallel to and along side edge of table; move bottom (foot) of back leg in 3 in from side edge of table, ensuring that it touches bottom edge of table. This is back slope of chair. Place 1 front leg 20 in from bottom of back leg parallel to side edge of table (not sloped).

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3. Place top and bottom side beams (parallel to bottom edge of table) across front and back legs, with bottom beam 4 in up from leg bottoms. Position front end of top side beam approx 1 in down from top of front leg. Adjust front and back legs to appropriate width. Using 2-1/2-in nails, fasten beams in place. Repeat for other side, making mirror image of first side ([Photo 1](#)).
 4. To join sides: Lay top front beam on top of top side beams; adjust width between sides and using 2-1/2-in nails, fasten in place. Place bottom front beam on top of bottom side beams; adjust sides and nail in place as above ([Photo 2](#)).
 5. Working at back of frame, determine desired width at top between 2 back legs and adjust. Nail top and bottom rear beams to back legs as in Step 4 ([Photos 2 and 4](#)).
 6. Place headrest beam on top of back legs so that it extends same amount on both sides; using 2-1/2-in nails, fasten ([Photo 2](#)).
 7. Eight inches above top rear beam, measure distance between back legs and cut stretcher beam to fit. Using 3-1/2- or 4-in nails, fasten stretcher to back legs, nailing through each leg into centre of stretcher beam.
 8. Position back ends of side braces inside back legs and under bottom rear beam. Position front ends of side braces outside front legs and under top side beams ([Photo 1](#)). Using 2-1/2-in nails, fasten to front legs only.
- Examine frame, making sure everything is symmetrical. Square up frame by pushing or pulling on beams. Using 2-1/2-in nails, fasten back ends of side braces to back legs.
9. Secure frame by double nailing in every location.

10. Using 2-1/2-in nails, fasten front seat beam to top side beams just behind top front beam; attach rear seat beam to top side beams 5 in from top rear beam ([Photos 1 and 2](#)).

11. To make first armrest: Select 5 or 6 shoots and bow each along length by flexing gently over knee. Place root end of first shoot inside bottom front beam ([Photo 3](#)); bring other end up and over to outside of back leg, forming gentle curve with highest point of bow 28 in from ground approx in middle of side.

Bend down upper part of shoot and using 1-5/8-in finishing nails, fasten to back leg approx 8 in above top side beam ([Photo 4](#)). To achieve desired amount of armrest flare beyond outside of chair, adjust shoot by adjusting free root end at front. Nail first shoot to top front beam, 4 or 5 shoot widths away from front leg. This shoot is the first of 5 or 6 to be installed. Make any adjustments using lower free end, then, using finishing nail, fasten to bottom front beam approx 10 to 12 in from end of beam. Repeat for other side. The shoot ends will be cropped later.

12. Fasten each successive shoot to back leg on top of preceding shoot, Using 1-in finishing nails, fasten shoots to each other at 4- to 5-in intervals over entire length.

13. To make headrest hoop: Bow each shoot as in Step 11. Place root end of first shoot inside top side beam on outside of armrest and behind rear seat beam, leaving overhang of 3 to 4 in ([Photo 4](#)). Loop shoot up and over chair back in front of headrest beam and down other side of chair, positioning shoot in same manner as on other side (see photo at top of page). This is bottom shoot of headrest hoop.

Add remaining hoops on top of previous shoots, alternating root and top ends. Adjust, then, using 1-in finishing nails, fasten to headrest beam and at intervals as in Step 12.

14. To make back/seat: Rasp root ends of each shoot. Place first shoot in through back at centre, having rasped end resting on top front beam and upper end loose behind headrest hoop. (The rasped ends will be lined up evenly to create front edge of seat.) Gently push shoot downward from top to work shoot into gentle curve at back of seat.

While holding curve in position and using 1-5/8-in finishing nails, fasten to rear seat beam; then fasten to front seat beam, then to stretcher. Space each successive back/seat shoot as desired, matching curve of first shoot as closely as possible. Using 1 nail per shoot, fasten loose top ends to hoop; crop shoots at top. Crop armrest ends (see photo at top of page).

15. [To preserve your chair](#): Using 1 part turpentine to 2 parts linseed oil, finish.

