

Salix gracilistyla Pussy Willow

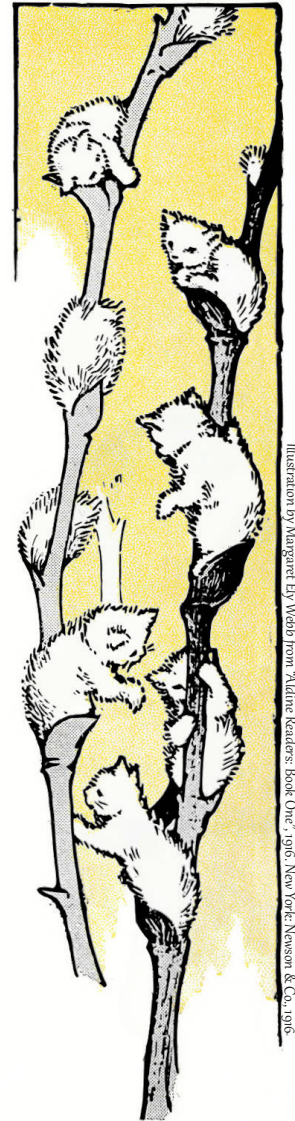


Salix gracilistyla (rose-gold pussy willow) heralds the arrival of Spring. This unique willow is one of the first plants to break bud in late winter. It is a widely spreading shrub with long graceful branches. Before the leaves unfold, the silvery, soft, fuzzy, furry buds called catkins (flower clusters) will cover the branches. When flowers are produced before the leaves, as is common with the pussy willows, we call them precocious.

The soft fuzzy coat of silvery fur insulates and helps keep the developing flowers warm and protected from the last cold days of winter. These catkins give the pussy willow its common name. The word catkin comes from *katteken* which is an old Dutch word for kitten, and the pussy willow buds are soft and velvety like a kitten's soft and velvety fur. There are many legends and fables from around the world that tell the story about how pussy willows got their name.

According to an old Polish legend:

"Many springs ago, tiny kittens were chasing butterflies along the edge of the river and fell in. The mother cat, helpless to save them, started crying. The willows at the river's edge heard her sorrowful cries and swept their long, graceful branches into the water towards the kittens. The kittens gripped the branches tightly and were safely brought to shore. Each springtime since, goes the legend, willow branches sprout tiny fur like buds where the tiny kittens once clung."

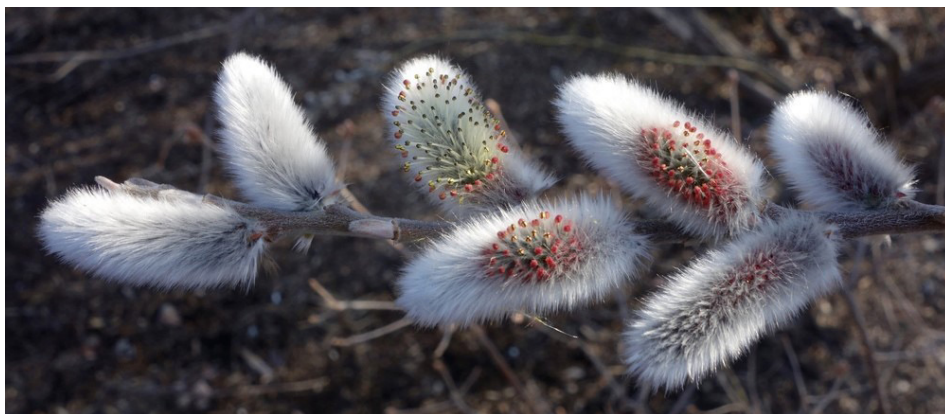


Willows are dioecious, meaning the male (pollen producing) flowers are on one plant and female (seed producing) flowers are on another. The 1” to 2” furry catkins (a type of inflorescence or compact flower cluster) are produced on bare stems, making them stand out visually. The male plants are striking in the landscape with their soft furry silver buds. The silver buds that people think of as pussy willows are the male catkins. The female plants produce catkins too, but they open a little later and are less showy. Neither have showy colorful petals. The male flowers are fully open when long stamens (male flower parts) emerge from the soft gray fuzz covered in bright yellow pollen. Pussy willows, like the typical willow trees, are entomophilous, which means they are pollinated by insects. Some willows, however, are anemophilous, pollinated by the wind.

Flowering Cycle of Pussy Willows



Sometimes young pussy willow flower buds wear little “hats” that are pushed off as the flowers develop. The little hats were the tightly sealed bud scales that protected and surrounded the flowers in the coldest of winter days.



Rosegold pussy willow have bright red anthers on the male catkins that turn orange, then yellow, giving this plant the name rosegold. As the male flowers mature, stamens filled with bright yellow pollen will start to emerge from bright red pollen sacs ready to pollinate.