One of the most unique willows in late winter or early spring is the black pussy willow. It is a widely spreading shrub with long, graceful, scarlet branches.

Do you know where pussy willow gets its common name?

See back for the answer...
The furry **catkins** (flower clusters) that cover the branches in early spring give the pussy willow its common name.

Willows are **dioecious**, meaning the male flowers are on one plant and female flowers are on another. The 1” to 2” furry catkins are produced on bare stems, making them stand out visually. When flowers are produced before the leaves, as is common with the pussy willows, we call them **precocious**.

Although the common name black pussy willow (**Salix gracilistyla var. melanostachys**) implies that the catkins are black, they are actually very dark, red-purple with anthers of deep red. **Melano** is the Greek word for “very dark” and **stachys** means “spike” or “catkin.” Rosegold pussy willow (**Salix gracilistyla**) has bright red anthers on the male catkins that turn orange, then yellow, giving this plant the name rosegold.

Both pussy willows are native to Japan, Korea, Manchuria, and China. There is also a native pussy willow (**Salix discolor**), which grows in wet areas over much of the eastern United States but is not growing currently at the Arboretum. Like most other willows, the pussy willow grows in moist or wet places. The willow collection at the Arboretum is located across from the Visitor Center, next to the meadow.

**Letterboxing!**

Letterboxing is a fun way to explore the willow collection at the Arboretum. For more information on letterboxing, go to www.letterboxing.org.

*To find the letterbox, follow these directions:*

- Start on Meadow Road in front of the Visitor Center. Walk south down Meadow Road past a total of 6 light poles. At the last light you will see a drinking fountain.

- Take 28 more steps to the green donation box. Directly across the street are 2 black pussy willows. Have a close look at them.

- Continue another 64 steps down Meadow Road. On the left is a large katsura tree. On either side of the katsura is a rosegold pussy willow.

- If you look at the base of the right/southern shrub, you will find the letterbox where the trunks meet the ground (it might be under some snow).