

# Gardenlife

## HIGH FLYERS

Alan Titchmarsh's favourite climbers

## CHEER UP IT'S SPRING

Pots of colourful ideas

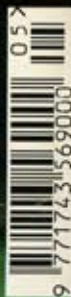
## HANDS ON

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## HAVE A SEAT

The best of the new season's furniture

The Matt James beginner's guide







Kim's sculptures will eventually grow green coats as they take root and sprout new leaves





# DREAM WEAVER

Some people's passions are more unconventional than others. Kim Cresswell makes animals from willow, but when you travel in a gypsy wagon and sleep in a tent, convention takes on a whole new meaning, says **Rose Shepherd**

PHOTOGRAPHS **STEVEN WOOSTER**

**W**ith her nimble fingers, Kim Cresswell can weave the essence of an animal into her willow sculptures. It's about more than just the shape, she says: 'It's about getting a bit of soul into them.' Nor is it only her artist's eye and touch that bring the sculptures to life. In spring, the wood takes root and sends out new shoots, and the animals take on a fuzz of green, looking, says Kim, 'like furry beasts'. When the foliage dies off in autumn, the woody shoots are simply woven into the structure.

'The beauty of living willow sculptures is that if you leave them alone, they're trees. And if you manage them, they're constantly changing: they won't be the same two years in a row, but they'll keep their basic shape. For the first few years they don't grow that much. Then, during the following summers, you trim them back to keep the shape. They're a reflection of whoever's maintaining them,' Kim says. She shows me a snapshot of one of her horses, which, left to its ▶





**ABOVE** Baskets are still a big seller (above right) but Kim also makes animals, including pigs and geese (top and bottom left) from a range of different colours of willow – but rarely before a hearty breakfast **OPPOSITE** Daughter Rowan peers out of the wagon where she was born and still lives

own devices for three years. has bolted, putting out long, mad shoots. 'When I saw this, I really liked it, because you could see the shadow of the animal within the bush, but the owners wanted me to bring it back to the original shape, so I did.' Kim's sculptures are not just lifelike but, life-size. A pair of 2.4m (8ft) hares are exceptions, as is the 2.4m (8ft) giraffe that lives with one of Kim's deer in a garden in Scotland, but whose owner is homesick for Mozambique.

Kim has embraced the traveller's way of life, sharing a yurt with daughter Rowan, aged 10, and driving a gypsy caravan drawn by her horses Vonga (Romany for money) and Stodge. She

grew up in Byfleet, Surrey, where she stayed until the M25 and M23 carved up her beloved countryside. 'I went from living in this beautiful wooded area that had otters in the streams, to a place that was totally dead and suffocating,' she says. Her reaction was to take to the road in a van and try to survive as a painter.

The back of a clapped-out car was a 'less than ideal' home, and Kim was inspired by fellow travellers to build herself a traditional gypsy bender, a tent made from a sturdy frame of branches. 'Normally, you'd use hazel, but we were parked in Oxfordshire, where there was only willow to hand. In spring, when we took

the canvas off, there was a dome of living willow, with buds all along. That's when the penny dropped. I looked at it and thought, "I could make things that live and grow."

These days, people invite Kim into their gardens to prune their trees and take away unwanted wood, but at first she took her willow from hedgerows. 'I just used what was around me to make my living. When you look, there's willow everywhere. If you cut it carefully, it's beneficial to the plant. And you get so many colours. I like to use what's about. For unicorn horns I use ash that's had bindweed growing round it, so you get a sort of knobby shape.' ▶





Without me asking her to, Rowan started making willow hearts and putting them inside the sculpture





Kim relies on horse power to get around in her wagon, which she designed and built with a friend

Before she graduated to animals, Kim found someone to teach her basketry. 'I use things like holly and brambles, hazel and elm to create different colours and textures for my baskets. Dogwood, as well,' she says. She then attempted her first living sculpture, a very plausible lurcher. 'I was selling baskets at the side of the road and people kept stopping and buying them, which encouraged me to make more. Then, with the off-cuts, I thought, "Well, I'll make a dog and see what happens." I put this dog out with the baskets, and for weeks no one bought it. Then someone did, and suddenly loads of people stopped and said, "Where's that dog? I wanted it." So I had to make another.'

Kim finds work through word of mouth and the workshops she runs. Commissions have included 'Henry' the show donkey, for a donkey breeder; a horse for an equine spa; and a centaur for a racing stable. Usually Kim will go to the premises and check out the lie of the land. 'That way, I can get the mood right, and the angle, to go with the place. I generally go back the following year to see how it looks. It's lovely to see them all again.' Kim is self-taught and now perfectly self-sufficient. 'Until last year I'd never

I just used what was around me. There's willow everywhere

seen a living willow sculpture by someone else. I think that was beneficial, because it meant I developed my own style,' she says.

Kim's daughter Rowan, who was born in the caravan, has known no other life than this. 'When she was smaller, she used to be quite proud when the bus went past and all the kids would go, "Ooh, look, a unicorn!,"' says Kim. 'She's a really sweet thing. Without me asking her to she started making willow hearts and putting them inside the sculptures.' Maybe that's the secret of their living, breathing quality. ☺

*Rose Shepherd is a novelist whose favourite plant in her Peckham garden is a magnolia tree.*

To order a sculpture from Kim, or for details about workshops, call her on 0776 565 4771.



### Want to have a go?

If Kim has inspired you to try your hand at live willow weaving you'll have to wait until October, as you can only work the stems over winter when they're dormant. You could practise on basket-making canes though (which are sold in most craft shops). Unless you have willow stems growing in your garden (often called withies or rods), buy them from a specialist nursery (see below). Kim recommends *Salix viminalis*, which grows particularly straight. Two-year-old stems are suitable for sturdy uprights, while year-old stems are more flexible and ideal for the woven infill.

Kim suggests making a simple basket shape first, then, once you feel confident, trying a simple structure such as an arch. 'Beyond that,' she says, 'the only limit is your imagination.'

Willow is infinitely adaptable and grows well throughout the UK. It copes with shade but loves sun too, and is happiest in moist, fertile soil. Do watch out, though – willows have very long roots and shouldn't be planted too close to buildings or drainage pipes.

### Living willow suppliers

- L A Musgrove & Sons, Bridgwater, Somerset (01278 691105/  
www.musgrovewillows.co.uk ☒)
- West Wales Willows, Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire (01437 741714/  
www.westwaleswillows.co.uk ☒)
- Wally's Willows, Ulverston, Cumbria (07740 053794 ☒)

### Further reading

For a guide to making fences and living furniture, look at *Living Willow Sculpture* by Jon Warnes (Search Press, £7.95 plus £1.50 p&p, from West Wales Willows).