

the *willow* woman

Scottish weaver Lizzie Farey has always been inspired to push the boundaries of her craft, transforming her home-grown crop and other natural materials into contemporary works of art


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LIZZIE FAREY IS SITTING ON THE FLOOR of her Kirkcudbright studio, surrounded by thousands of willow twigs and piles of tiny steel pins. With the light streaming through the large windows of the Georgian property on the high street of this beautiful artists' town on Scotland's Solway coast, she painstakingly shapes, curves and arranges the seemingly random assortment of materials into a striking creation that captures the beauty and movement of nature – flocks of birds massing together, swallows swooping through the sky, wispy clouds formulating, flowers and leaves intertwining, or meadow grasses rustling in the breeze. In Lizzie's hands, willow becomes a pencil that she draws with and its soft, muted colours with evocative names form her palette – Flanders Red, Brittany Blue, Oxford Violet, Black Maul, Black Satin, Purple Osier and Green Dicks.

At this time of year, Lizzie is also to be found harvesting the crop of willow she grows on a half-acre rented field near her home in the small village of Rhonehouse in rural Dumfries & Galloway, edged by golden larch trees, evergreen Scots pine, wild rushes, reeds and heather moorland. Often, only the haunting cries of



“Ever since
childhood
I have been
fascinated by
living things”

THIS PICTURE In the garden of her home in Dumfries & Galloway, Lizzie soaks the willow in an old cattle trough so the rods will become flexible enough for weaving and shaping



curlews and wild geese break the still air of this sparsely populated area. On crisp January days, when the sun is out and a covering of hard snow glitters on the ground, Lizzie coppices the stems after the leaves have fallen, when she can be certain that the plants are dormant. "It can be freezing work and I have to wrap up warm, but I like feeling in tune with the rhythm of the seasons," she says. Friends and neighbours come to help, bundling up the rods of the 15 different varieties (one plant can produce 200 and some reach a height of more than four metres) and leaving them to dry at the end of each row before Lizzie transports them on a trailer back to the wooden summerhouse in her garden to dry out further.

From growing to weaving, every stage of the process is inspired by Lizzie's passion for willow, a dedication that began back in 1991 when her sister-in-law gave her an impromptu lesson in weaving. "I'd seen a Moses basket she had embellished with woven plaited rushes for her baby daughter and really wanted to have a go," Lizzie explains. "I loved the immediacy of it and also the sense of tradition – basketmaking is Britain's oldest craft and dates back

around 12,000 years. There's something primeval about it." So she began creating simple stake-and-strand basket designs for friends, later experimenting with weaves, sizes and shapes to perfect her techniques, and attending courses with skilled practitioners such as Mary Butcher and Joe Hogan: "There was no formal training then, so I learnt everything piecemeal. In 1997, I went into business, selling pieces at a gallery in Castle Douglas. I started to teach, too, so I could spread the word about the wonders of willow."

Now processes such as pairing, twining, slewing and French randing are second nature but the secret of Lizzie's success is that she has always been prepared to push the boundaries – over the past ten years her work has become more sculptural, moving her style from traditional craft into eye-catching art. Her pieces now sell across the world, via her website and exhibitions, and have been displayed in such illustrious places as the V&A and Saatchi Gallery in London.

Using other natural materials has brought further variety to her collection – pussy willow, bog myrtle, larch, hazel, rowan, ➔

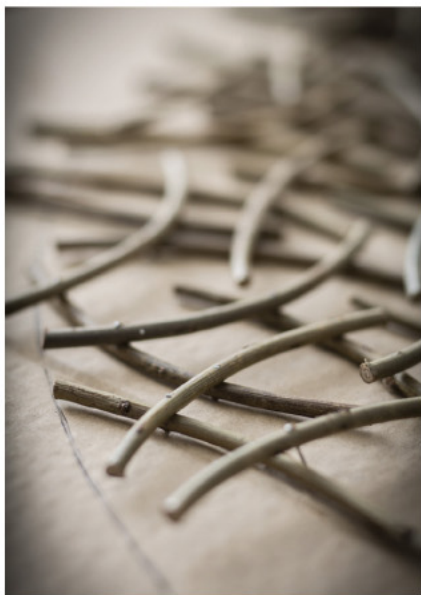
THIS PAGE Lizzie at work in her spacious studio in Kirkcudbright, part of a Georgian townhouse. As well as her own willow crop, she loves to incorporate other natural materials, such as pussy willow and bog myrtle, to introduce extra texture and movement to a piece

A woman with dark hair, wearing a dark green long-sleeved top and black trousers, is kneeling on a white protective sheet on a wooden floor. She is focused on arranging a large, intricate circular sculpture made of dark, thin willow branches. In the background, a wooden workbench holds several woven baskets and a small vase with dried flowers. Behind the workbench, large bundles of dried willow branches are propped against a white wall. To the right, a tall wooden cabinet is visible. The scene is lit with soft, natural light from a window on the left.

Bundles of
willow in soft,
muted shades
are propped
against the
studio walls


THIS PICTURE

Arranging the different elements of an artwork can take many hours of concentration. "But I never get tired of working with willow," Lizzie says



ash, dogwood, honeysuckle, heather and wild plum have all been incorporated to add extra texture and interest to vessels, vases, urns, spheres and large dramatic circles. "I regularly walk along the narrow lanes bordered by hedgerows around my home and gather anything that catches my eye and sparks an idea, whether that's a flower, a particular texture of bark or a colour," Lizzie explains. As word has spread, villagers alert her to plants that might inspire her. The postman has been known to drop off wild plum cuttings with her letters, while the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh gave her a tangled mass of corkscrew hazel that she transformed into intriguing, beautiful baskets you want to reach out and touch. "I like my work to celebrate the individual qualities of each material and feel alive," Lizzie says. "I draw on the basketmaking techniques of the past to make contemporary designs."

Moving to the studio in the harbour town of Kirkcudbright, a 15-minute drive from home, four years ago has allowed Lizzie's individual approach to weaving with willow to flourish even further. Prior to this she rented an old barn and regularly

had to stop work to chop logs for the woodburner that needed to be constantly fired up to keep the space warm. Rented through Wasps – an organisation that renovates old buildings in Scotland and converts them into low-cost studios for artists – her current workshop has windows on three sides and Lizzie has furnished it with old pieces of family furniture, such as her grandmother's desk, to create a comfortable, lived-in feel. Simple jugs and vases hold natural finds that have been brought back from her walks in the surrounding countryside. Bundles of willow in an array of soft shades are propped against the walls and it won't be long before Lizzie will be weaving her next piece of magic: "I'm always thinking about what else I can do with this extraordinary material." 

Starting price for a wall artwork is £500; baskets cost from £150. To view Lizzie's current range of items or to commission a bespoke piece, visit lizziefarey.co.uk. For further details about Wasps, visit waspsstudios.org.uk.

THIS PAGE Years of experience have taught Lizzie how the willow can be bent and shaped and she is always working on new techniques – curved creations are a particular passion. Many of her designs are bespoke commissions to suit a particular setting