

WILLOW HARVESTING

Gwen Wilkinson discovers an age-old tradition is still thriving in Tipperary

Driving along a twisting, rutted road at the foot of Slievenamon, I begin to question if I may have wandered a little too far off the beaten track, when suddenly a strikingly coloured willow bed reveals itself. I stop for a moment to take in the beautiful view, the bright strips of colour in the field below and the beautiful lime-washed cottage belonging to willow grower and basket maker, Patsy Cahill. Not surprisingly, Patsy is at this stage well used to passers-by who stop their cars to take in this arresting view.

Harvesting takes place between November and March when the sap is at its lowest in the willow. Patsy generally harvests towards the latter part of this period. His willow plantation is a mixture of varieties. The main species include: *Salix alba*, *Salix triandra*, *Salix purpurea*, *Salix viminalis*. A number of other



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crossbreeds are also grown. The colours range from vivid yellow, to delicate silvery green, to varying shades of brown.

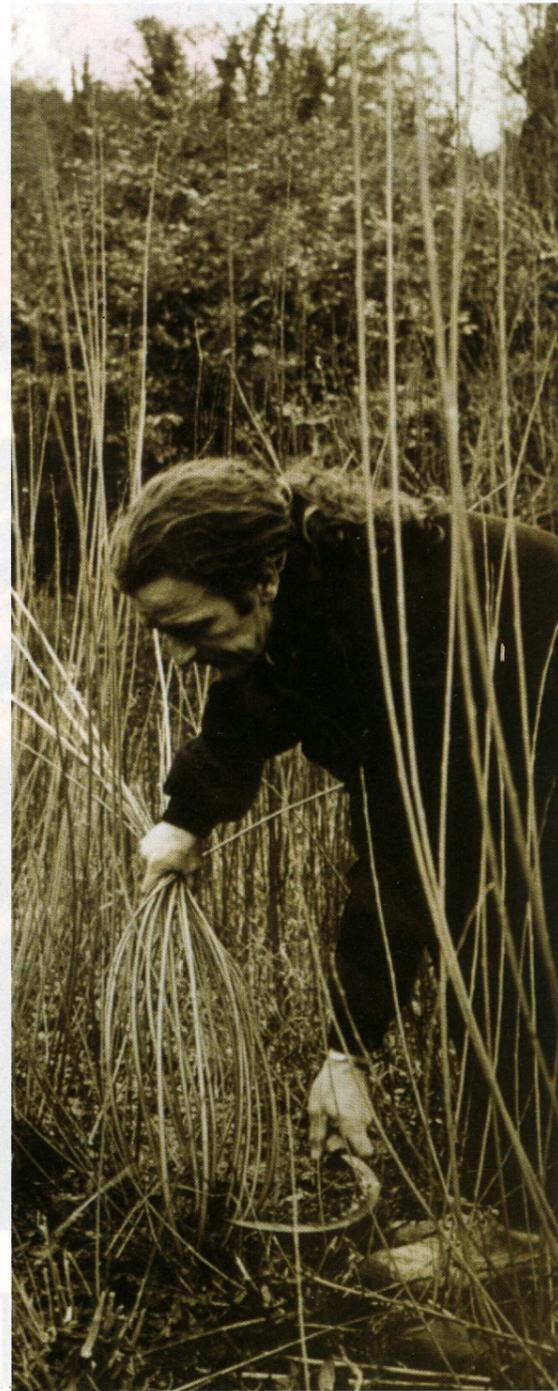
A layer of thick black plastic covers the ground of the willow bed – this is to keep weed growth to a minimum. Gnarled and bulbous stools (the base of the willow) protrude through the plastic. The older the willow the more knotted and woody the stool. From these stools the slim, straight rods stretch skywards. The effect resembles a larger-than-life pincushion. Patsy's willow bed is organically cultivated, he doesn't use any fertilisers and prefers not to spray with pesticides. Occasionally, he will let in the donkey or a couple of sheep to tackle the undergrowth if it begins to get too much out of control.

Harvesting is carried out manually – this is awkward and tiring work. Patsy spends most of his time bent double so that he can cut as close to the base of the rod as possible. He uses a serrated billhook to cut through the flexible rods. All rods are removed, leaving only the stool. It's hard to imagine that fresh new growth will have pushed up from the stubby base to provide a harvest for the following year.

The rods are gathered into bundles and stood on their cut ends. A single rod is passed around the middle of the bundle and secured in a rose knot. A second such tie can be placed around the base to prevent the cut ends from curling upwards. Bundles are left outdoors for a month or so and then put in a dry shed for storage until required. The bright yellows and reds will fade somewhat but will still be a distinctive colour contrast when worked into a finished basket piece.

In addition to his own basket-making requirements, Patsy supplies willow to other craftspeople in the industry. He also runs basket-making workshops and demonstrations.

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photography Gwen Wilkinson

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