

Washington Conservation District Plant of the Week – Winter 2010-11

By Jyneen Thatcher

November 16, 2010 – Weeping Willow

With winter solidly here now, I'm shifting to off-season mode meaning these e-mails will be at two week intervals. But we all know that plants are still present, obvious, and people ask us what "those things" are.



Yesterday I noticed that the weeping willows (*Salix babylonica*) are still holding their leaves. The weeping willow is not native to America, but was one of the species brought here from Asia for the landscape nursery trade. The leaves are slender/lanceolate, like many other willows, so the most common identification feature is the branching form. It is in the "crack" group of *Salix*, so named from the



brittleness of the branches. You might feel that's not possible, considering the way the terminal branches whip around in the wind. But ask the neighbors of the trees and they usually share stories of cleaning up after every storm. The branches are long, slender, and yellow in color, and break off at the node with the previous years branch. The larger branches also break easily under our snow loads, so it is common for road and utility crews to trim them severely, for safety reasons. And no, the terminal branches don't work well for basket weaving for the same reason, according to my sources.

Weeping willow has not become invasive in Minnesota, like other introduced species [such as *Salix fragilis* and *Salix x rubens* (whitecrack willow)]. Those species were planted in moist areas, especially along riparian corridors as part of earlier conservation programs, and the broken branches would re-root downstream.

Weeping willow also tolerates moist conditions, and is commonly planted along pond edges. Placement should be considered carefully, as the roots could cause problems with underground drain pipes, although they will help with transpiration of soil moisture. Like the native willows do.





And if planted around livestock, the tender shoots may entice the critters to prune them, especially the lower branches. [Yes, that is a tamarack in front of the willow, which also has been bottom-pruned]

For more information about the other species of willows, see DNR/Welby Smith's "Trees and Shrubs of Minnesota". He doesn't offer much information about weeping willow, since it's neither native nor widely escaped into native

habitats, but this source is the best for the other Salix species.