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LEVEL BEST

Based in the magnificent Somerset Levels, English Hurdle has revived the ancient art of hurdle making using specially grown willow withies

Words by OLIVIA TEMPLE Photographs by MARK BOLTON



The deep growing willow roots, which are cut to the ground every year, can yield multiple stems for 30 years



Facing page, top: Piles of hurdle fences. Facing page, below from left: Pruning living willow for a fence; kept wet, willow stays pliable; Nigel Hector, fifth from right, back, and son James, second from right, with some of their skilled staff; the many uses of living willow in the garden. Left: The willow beds where herons and skylarks live. Below: The ancient thatched farmhouse is still the base for English Hurdle.

The landscape of the Somerset Levels, or wetlands, is redolent of the paintings of Van Gogh. Pollarded willows scratch the sky with their fingers of new growth, reflections etched in the flooded meadows and wide ditches at their feet. This land has produced the best basket willow in Britain for the past two centuries.

Between Taunton and Bridgwater is a thriving family business which for generations has been producing willows as a crop for weaving. Father and son team, Nigel and James Hector, run the business, English Hurdle, which was started by James's grandfather, Cecil. He bought an ancient farmhouse with 100 acres of land on the Levels and became a major supplier of withies for baskets, in great demand in those days.

The business has evolved and now is also successfully reviving the art of traditional hurdle making, for fencing and garden products. The range is impressive and includes rolls of hurdle 'hedge', bought by the metre to form a living trellis, which can even have a window cut in it.

If you fancy a bower seat, a secluded arbour, a wigwam for children, an arch for roses, a fan up a garden wall or a conical climber to support sweet peas and clematis, this is the place for you.

The osier beds are clustered over the moors with outbuildings and barns converted into

offices, workshops and a showroom. English Hurdle now employ 20 people, seventeen of whom make hurdles. Veteran hurdle maker Stan Dare is a grand old man of withies who came to the Hectors when he retired to teach the art, virtually resurrecting the ancient craft – the Romans used hurdles for boundaries and laid them down as track over the flooded Levels.

The deep growing willow roots can yield multiple stems for 30 years, and these are cut to the ground every year. It was a back breaking and time consuming job for the men who cut them by hand. It could take three weeks to clear two acres and involved being bent double with a hook to hack each stem. Nowadays, with machinery, two acres can be cut in a day.

'We grow a number of different types of willow,' explains James. 'Some for the upright sticks for the hurdles, and others for weaving. *Salix triandra 'Black Maul'* is an old variety that used to be very popular for basket weaving and we are also experimenting with new hybrids.'

The colour varies, and the bark is greener when freshly cut and is used straight away to make hurdles. The rest is tied into bundles, using a knot made with a willow stem, and left outside to dry. The bundles are stored inside and soaked in warm water for five days to make the stems more pliable before use as hurdles.

The workshops are stacked with sheaves of withy and with work in progress and finished hurdles, all in soft hues of chestnut, mossy greens and auburns. Jay Davey works on designs for the garden furniture and hurdles as well as helping to realise customers' own ideas. The hurdles are woven on upright jigs, up to ten strands of willow being woven at a time. Each hurdle maker has a different style; customers can choose their preferred style and their order is then made up by that hurdler. Willow sculptor Serena de la Hay makes huge withy creatures: horses switching their tails, racing greyhounds and geese that fix you with a goosey eye.

The Hectors have more recently turned to the innovative technique of erosion control. Willow has a unique capacity to burst back into growth when the cut stems are placed back in the soil. These upright shoots can be placed side by side (known as spiling) and then woven together. As they shoot and burst into leaf and the strong roots spread densely, the river banks on which they are planted are protected from erosion. ■

English Hurdle, Curload, Stoke St Gregory, Taunton, Somerset TA3 6JD. Tel: 01823 690109. Living hedging rolls retail at £41 for 2 by 2 metres. Website: www.hurdle.co.uk

