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# Weaving a magical menagerie

Clean flowing water - and a place to pitch her yurt - are the basic requirements of Kim Creswell, who creates living woven sculptures out of willow and other branches

PHOTOGRAPHS DAVID MARKSON WORDS CAROL MARKSON

**P**igs, geese, hens, hares, donkeys, giraffes, eagles and dogs. Not creatures from a conservationist's farmyard, but part of Kim Creswell's extensive portfolio of sculptures. She makes them from cut willow branches, which, once she's finished, take root in the ground and produce leaf at the growing tip and along the stems. After the framework has established itself, Kim maintains the sculptures by pruning and also by weaving the new ►



growth into the body. The sculptures can be many times larger than life size: using a stepladder, and in an agile leap honed by long practice, Kim can be suddenly seen on the back of a deer, wielding secateurs and ready to start work on its neck, head and rump.

She also weaves sculptures from the different coloured varieties of dogwood, and was recently commissioned by the owner of the Glastonbury Festival site to make a Pre-Raphaelite inspired 'Lady of the Lake', standing in a rowing boat and with accompanying swan floating on a nest of concealed inner tube. They both thought it would be safe, anchored in the middle of an expanse of murky water, but somehow it still managed to disappear into the mists of Avalon.

As a child, Kim didn't like living in a house, and chose a life where she could travel the countryside, developing her weaving skills and broadening the range of materials with which she now works. A canvas yurt provides her shelter, although she also designs and paints bow top, horse drawn wagons, with a friend taking on the job of building them to her specifications. Rowan, her 11 year old

daughter, has a custom made one which she uses as her bedroom.

Come dusk, dinner is cooked in pots hung on a tripod over the campfire and she and Rowan sit around it to eat. The various household areas are carefully delineated and Kim doesn't allow her dog, hovering hopefully in the flickering shadows, 'in the kitchen'. Their two horses tow the caravan when it's time to move on, although they're static at the moment as Rowan is settled in primary school. Kim educated Rowan herself during the first two years of school so that they could keep moving.

Always choosing to strike camp near clean, flowing water, Kim uses this to soak the willow, making it pliable before working it. The nearby Somerset Levels is an important source of her raw materials, which are a relatively expensive commodity and which Kim treats with great care. On one occasion, a polluted watercourse ruined all the bundles she was soaking.

Hugely passionate in her enthusiasm for her life and her work, virtually all her clients are introduced by personal recommendation or from seeing a finished sculpture. Her current project is a giant auroch, the wild descendents



of domestic cattle, which have been extinct since 1627. 'They're going up on a site dubbed 'The Garden of Lost Nightmares' - it's an 'anti' garden, full of weeds and poisonous things,' but which has also been declared a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) because of its colony of great crested newts. A number of Kim's giant willow sculptures mark the perimeter of a specially created pond. 'I was working out on those, up a ladder, in blizzards, and that is definitely the hardest job I have ever done physically, as I was also training for a marathon at the same time and running up to forty miles a week.'

'I spend the winter cutting willow,' says Kim, 'and making living sculptures. These forms can only be made during the cold months, as that's when they root in the ground most easily. In summer I use stems that I've previously dried to make highly detailed, non-living sculptures.'

Various colours of willow are used to mark out the definitive parts of Kim's animal sculptures. 'If, for example, I was making a British Toggenburg goat, I'd use non-peeled willow to represent the dark brown of the body, and white willow for the pale patches

of the coat, which is prepared in a different way to the buff willow I use for the udders.'

'One year, I collected 18 different colours of willow, hazel and dogwood just from the hedgerows locally here in Dorset; even brambles, once stripped, have a lustrous colour. I've noticed, as well, that my horses will help themselves to willow, of which the soft pulp inside the bark is used to make aspirin, if they're feeling a bit off colour. When I kept goats I always knew when they were starting to get foot rot, because even before a problem was visible, they'd be stripping the bark off the stems I'd collected.'

Never short of work, Kim is always keen to demonstrate her skills to eager students through workshops and, this year staged an exhibition of her sculptures, entitled 'Mythical and Magical Dorset'. The natural world is itself woven through all aspects of her life. 'I never feel tempted back into a house,' she says; 'always being so close to the earth is both comfortable and feels totally right for me.'

*To order a sculpture or for details of her workshops, call Kim on tel: +44 (0)776 565 4771.*

#### SUPPLIERS OF LIVING WILLOW

- **West Wales Willows**, Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire SA62 5DY. Tel: +44 (0)1437 741714. [www.westwaleswillows.co.uk](http://www.westwaleswillows.co.uk)
- **Wally's Willows**, Ulverston, Cumbria LA12 8BJ. Tel: +44 (0)7740 053794.
- **L A Musgrove & Sons**, Weston Zoyland, nr Bridgwater, Somerset TA7 0LP. Tel: +44 (0)1278 691105. [www.musgrovewillows.co.uk](http://www.musgrovewillows.co.uk)
- Buy a yurt, like Kim's, from Yurtopia, in Dorset. Tel: +44 (0)1258 817117.

**PREVIOUS PAGE** Kim and daughter Rowan astride a larger than life willow wolf. **FACING PAGE** Home sweet home, Kim's pretty horse drawn wagon makes a magical bedroom for Rowan. **BELOW, FROM LEFT** Hard at work weaving new growth into an eagle; two enormous stags are poised in a permanent stand off; a variety of coloured willow is used in each piece; this Lady with Basket was created from seven different hedgerow materials.

