

A weaver's life

Sussex maker **Annemarie O'Sullivan** harvests her own willow withies, from which she weaves beautiful baskets inspired by ancient traditions

Words: Norman Miller Photos: Alun Callender/Narratives

Spring sunshine spills into Annemarie O'Sullivan's cosy wooden studio, lighting shelves and walls displaying beautiful baskets woven with willow, chestnut, sweet hazel and bamboo.

Annemarie works as we talk, sitting on the floor in a wide-v posture any dancer would be proud of, slowly weaving. The baskets she makes here in the Sussex village of Isfield, north of the medieval town of Lewes, have achieved global renown: she has exhibited them across Europe, the USA and Asia. Today, she's weaving grasses into an artistic, circular shape bound for an exhibition in Somerset – the sort of complement to her coveted basketry that includes startling twiggy lampshades and one-off sculptural pieces.

Despite their status as high-end craft, Annemarie wants her baskets to be used: "...to get crumbs in them, to get worn, to get picked up by greasy hands. It does feel really important that they have a life."

Annemarie works primarily with willow, which she grows herself and



are very slender and waxy," she says.

Annemarie came to basketmaking late, and by chance. Having grown up in a small Irish town, she moved to England aged 17. By the age of 30 she was working as a school teacher, married with two young sons – and keenly aware of a desire for something more. An impulse decision to do a one-day basket-weaving course changed everything.

MADE OF THE LANDSCAPE

A part-time basketry training course followed at City Lit college in London – where she eventually became a teacher – to gain a bedrock of skills and insight into the qualities of different materials.

"The brilliant thing about basketmaking is that people used what they had – used what was accessible,"

explains Annemarie. "So if you go to mountainous regions in central Europe it's all split wood, and if you go to coastal regions there's much more rush. Skill sets and materials that really relate to landscape."

Now in her 50th year, the physicality of Annemarie's work means she

"I want my baskets to get crumbs in them, to get worn... It feels important that they have a life"

harvests every January (see box, page 41) from a watery half-acre withy bed at nearby Horam. She works mainly with the purple willow, *Salix purpurea*, grown in several varieties with resonant names, such as 'Dicky Meadows' and 'Lancashire Dicks'.

"I love these [varieties] because they

LEFT Annemarie finds inspiration in traditional basketry and in the natural shape and movement of the growing willow, creating large-scale artworks as well as domestic baskets **INSET** The willow in Annemarie's own beds was grown from cuttings given to her by fellow basketmakers



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Annemarie needs all the space her studio can offer when weaving large baskets; after building the base, Annemarie pulls up the ribs to create the shape; trimming the finished basket; the repetition of weaving creates a fluid and rhythmic movement **RIGHT** After soaking in water, rods are left to mellow before weaving



starts each day with stretching exercises, preparing herself for creative labour which can leave her aching – in a good way – at the end of a working day.

For Annemarie, the movements involved in basket-weaving also link to another of her passions: wild swimming. “They’re the same,” she argues, highlighting shared flowing movements – “left, right, over, under.” Formerly a competitive swimmer in Ireland, today she ventures for hardy year-round ocean dips at Seaford on the coast, or enjoys the liquid embrace of the River Ouse as it winds through Isfield.

A RICHLY WOVEN TRADITION

Annemarie sees basketmaking as historically undervalued; it was seen as creating utilitarian “things for carrying other things”, in contrast to making decorative objects fashioned with higher status materials. “In the history of basketmaking there were lots of different situations when baskets were made,” she says. “There would be professional makers who’d make very precise kinds of shopping baskets or baskets for ladies to carry, and then there were agricultural makers who would use the winter months to make rough baskets to be used for a single season. But all those people were highly skilled and had precious knowledge.”

Passing on knowledge is vital to Annemarie, who offers both paid apprenticeships in her studio and more ad hoc teaching in the wider community via regular courses (see page 42). Her work builds on a

centuries-old local basketmaking tradition exemplified by the Sussex trug, made using sweet chestnut frames with wide willow strips.

Collaborative projects that involve learning and sharing skills are also crucial to Annemarie, be it a ‘Willow Chair’ made with furniture-maker Gareth Neal, or an incredible lightshade from a residency on Orkney, fashioned from rye straw (known there as taets). Annemarie also collects diverse pieces made by others, from a thickly woven chicken coop basket

acquired in Orkney to work by admired contemporary makers, such as Cumbria’s Lorna Singleton (lornasingleton.co.uk).

Annemarie is hopeful of a growing

appreciation of her craft in the UK – catching up perhaps with attitudes in Japan. She tells me of a Japanese basketmaker who bought one of her creations. “He came and looked maybe four or five times – then brought his whole family, and they all walked around the work, getting down to take it in from different levels... The consideration was so different. But the level is growing here. I think we’re at a real turning point.”

Yet despite the complexities of basketmaking history and its cultural perceptions, Annemarie celebrates its essential humbleness. “You could

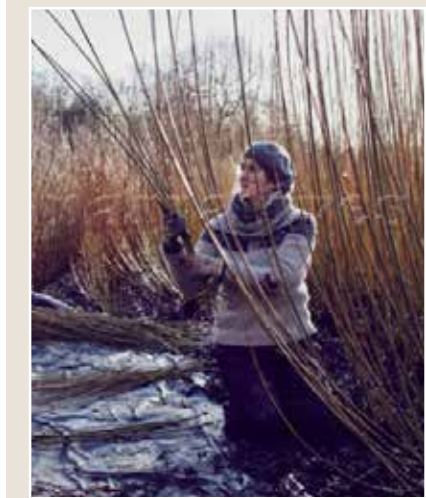
A YEAR IN A WILLOW-WEAVER’S LIFE

Planning and preparations are as integral to Annemarie’s work as creativity. The willow needs planting, cutting and harvesting; it is then sorted by size and type, then dried.

Harvesting occurs in January, when plants at her decade-old willow bed are cut down to ground level. The withies are sorted on site into bundles of similar lengths, discarding any that are diseased or have too much side branching. They are then dried slowly, outside in an airy atmosphere, until May, when they go into storage.

When the willow is required for weaving, it is rehydrated in a long water trough that runs along one side of Annemarie’s studio – using a rule of thumb that for every foot of rod, you soak for a day. Rods are removed from the trough a day before they are to be woven to give them a chance to mellow.

They are then usable for two or three days; any rods not used by then are discarded.






ABOVE The stove-warmed studio was built by Annemarie's husband Tom McWalter, who has joined her full-time in the basketmaking business

make a basket with just sticks and a knife." That said, there are specialist tools that look and feel like ancient implements people would have used a millennia ago. For example, the horn (literally, a cow horn) is filled with lubricating material (previously it was tallow, today lanolin) in which to dip tools such as a bodkin, which is used to

open space in a weave to slip something through.

And then, for Annemarie, there's the simple joy of interacting so physically with distinctive natural materials. "It's like a dance, with little quirks and tricks. Put your hand just there or put your foot just there. Tiny movements," she says. "I really like days when it's

just me making a basket... I come in here in the morning, light the fire and it's just quiet." 



Norman Miller is an award-winning UK-based writer whose work has appeared in BBC.com, *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *Daily Telegraph*.

LEARN TO WEAVE BASKETS

Annemarie's short courses at her studio have sold out for 2022; annemarieosullivancourses.com.

But others across the UK, including the following, can be booked on craftcourses.com.

- **Make Your Own Traditional Sussex Trug** Two-day course at Mantel Farm near Battle in East Sussex; £218.
- **Willow Work** This five-day retreat is on the 100-acre Gartmore Estate in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, Scotland; £979 (includes room, board and pick-up from Stirling).
- **Ash Splint Basket Workshop** Two-day cottage-based 'Log to Basket' course at Corfe Mullen in deepest Dorset. Learn about weaving

techniques used by native North American peoples; £185.

- **English Oval Baskets** Two-day willow basket weaving workshop in a rugged setting near Carnforth, Yorkshire Dales; £160.
- **Asymmetric and Breton Baskets** One-day courses at Higher Barn near Exeter, making either a tall asymmetric basket or a round Breton basket; £75.
- **Sacred Geometry and Hexagonal Weave Basketry** One-day course with New Age resonances, at Forest Row in Sussex. Create hexagonal weave basketry based on patterns, such as the harmonious golden ratio; £80.



- **English Willow Basketmaking** Over two days, make a shopping basket and bread basket at Norfolk Hedge Baskets, near Norwich; £140.
- **Hedgerow Basketmaking** In a barn at Usk Castle in Wales, weave a basket in a day using coloured wild hedgerow materials and several different weaving techniques; £105.