Native to much of Canada and the northern half of the United States, the beloved pussy willow (*Salix discolor*) heralds spring by bursting its bud scales, revealing catkins clothed in silk. Like the long hairs on pasque flowers and hepaticas, the pussy willow’s silky fur helps to insulate its catkins from the chilly, changing weather of the early season. Throughout this willow’s wide range, winter-weary folks bring its budding branches indoors to brighten their homes, and watch with delight, as the male catkins gradually develop their beautiful golden stamens.

**Value for birds**
The pussy willow provides food for a variety of birds. Its buds and tender twigs are eaten by grouse, including blue, spruce, ruffed and sharp-tailed grouse. Ptarmigans and pine grosbeak prefer to feed only on its buds. Some waterfowl, such as mallards and wood ducks, eat its catkins.

American goldfinches frequently nest in pussy willows, and no doubt other species of birds find nest sites as well as shelter from inclement weather and predators within the branches of this multi-stemmed shrub. The ruby-throated hummingbird uses the fuzz on willow seeds for nesting material, and feasts on the swarms of insects attracted by the flowers.

By examining fecal samples of birds, researchers have been able to describe the willow-reliant insect diets of six species of spring-migrating warblers.

Along with skunk cabbage, pussy willows are among the first to bloom each spring.

**Other wildlife values**
In addition to insects and birds, many other animals feast on pussy willows. Notable among them are beaver and varying hare, which eat the bark, buds, and wood. Hoofed browsers like deer, elk, and especially...
mooose, feed on the twigs and foliage. Many other animals rely on the pussy willow for some of their food. Muskrats, pika, cottontail rabbits, and fox, along with gray and red squirrels feed on its bark, buds, and wood. Its foliage and catkins are eaten by meadow mice and native wood rats.

**Landscape notes**
The pussy willow is an excellent and hardy shrub for any site with moist to wet soils. Usually the first willow to flower in spring, its silky catkins are as attractive on the shrub, as in a vase. The pussy willow grows rapidly, and is very easy to root in water. It can also be propagated from stem cuttings which are simply placed in moist soil, where they will take root on their own. The stems should be taken when the plants are dormant in early spring, late fall, or winter, when the ground is not frozen. Stems should be about 2 or 3 feet long, with a diameter of about a half to one and one-half inches. Cut the lower ends at an angle, and the top ends flat, so they can be pounded into the soil. After cutting, immediately place the stems in water, and plant within a few days – preferably the same day. Pound a rod into the soil first to make a hole for the cutting – then put a small block of wood over the flat end before pounding the cutting into the soil, so the stem does not split.

**Also of interest**
The willow (*Salix genus*) is the original source of one of the most prescribed medicines throughout history – the aspirin. Hippocrates (460-377 BC) was the first to record that chewing willow leaves reduced pain, but it is believed to have been used in folk medicine centuries earlier. Perhaps long before the Greeks, the American Indians also used willow to relieve fevers and pain. In the 1800s, scientists isolated the key pain-killing ingredient – salicin – from the willow, and in 1899, the Bayer Company, in Germany, was the first to market aspirin tablets.