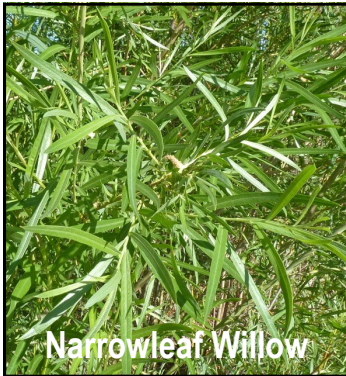# Friends of SNOW CANYON

What's That Plant… a Willow??

Narrowleaf Willow

Desert Willow

Two "Core Plants" found in Snow Canyon have narrow, linear leaves characteristic of Willows. They are called **Narrowleaf Willow** and **Desert Willow**.

However… although their leaves look similar, they are <u>not</u> related. Narrowleaf Willow is a true Willow and Desert Willow is not even a member of the Willow family, Salicaeae.

So, how do you tell them apart?

Begin by looking for other features such as flowers, fruit and growth habit.

True Willows (in the genus *Salix*) are trees or shrubs that produce inconspicuous flowers borne in catkins. Male (staminate) and female (pistillate) flowers appear on separate plants in the spring after the leaves and are pollinated by the wind.

Female flowers forming fruit

Male flowers

The fruit is a cluster of capsules containing numerous, minute seeds embedded in silky cotton.

Narrowleaf Willow is a shrub or small tree reaching 15-20 feet. The narrow, green leaves are shiny and up to 4-5" long. The young branches are yellow to brown-red, turning to gray with age. It spreads rapidly by underground roots, forming dense thickets. It is found almost exclusively in riparian habitats, growing along streams, ponds and in washes.

Narrowleaf or Sandbar Willow
Salix exigua — Willow Family

A key to identifying Narrowleaf Willow is its growth habit and flexible branches. Native Americans used the stems for baskets, bows and poles. They made tea and medicine from the bark to treat various ailments. Pioneers used the wood to construct fences, shelter for livestock and for firewood.

Did you know?

The inner bark of Willows contains Salicin, which when chemically converted into Salicylic Acid, is the active ingredient in Aspirin. The family name Salicaceae and the genus Salix are derived from this compound.

Desert Willow
Chilopsis linearis
Catalpa or Trumpetcreeper Family
Bignoniaceae

Desert Willow is a large, woody shrub or multi-trunked tree with a loose, open crown. It can reach 15-25 feet in height with a spread of 10-15 feet and is usually low branching.

It is classified as a **phreatophyte** — a plant with a very deep root system that draws its water supply from near the water table. These plants often have their roots constantly in touch with moisture.

In Snow Canyon, this plant is most often found in sandy washes but it has also been extensively planted in landscapes in this area. It has been cultivated for its showy flowers and its tolerance to hot and dry conditions. There are a number of cultivars commercially available.

The wood of Desert Willow was the most important part of the plant to Native Americans. Since the branches were strong and resistant to decay, they were used to build houses and large basket-like structures called granaries, that were used to store food such as beans and seeds.

How to identify a Desert Willow...

Fortunately, Desert Willow has several distinctive features, making it easier to identify than Narrowleaf Willow.

The flowers are large and showy, occurring in May through September. They are trumpet shaped, about

1 ½" wide and vary in color from pink, lavender to purple. They are fragrant and are a rich source of nectar for hummingbirds, large bees and butterflies.

The fruit is a long, slender pod about the width of a pencil and 6-12" long. They contain numerous winged seeds and the dried, brown pods

often remain on the tree throughout the winter.

The willow-like leaves are bright green, only about ¼" wide, 5" or more in length and tend to hang vertically. This is one of the last trees to leaf out in spring.

So, what is a *Chitalpa*?

As a member of the Catalpa Family, *Chilopsis* (Desert Willow) is closely related to the genus *Catalpa*. These two have been genetically crossed, resulting in a hybrid named *Chitalpa*, a combination of both parents names. One of the resulting hybrids is 'Pink Dawn' which is a popular landscape plant.

Chitalpa 'Pink Dawn'

Note that the leaves of Chitalpa are wider, up to 1½" wide and 4-5" long.