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Pussy Willows

Mrs. William Starr Dana

Soon after the skunk cabbage has sent up its purple hoods comes the pussy-willow season. But it is not every child who has the luck to be in the country at this time.

There is a clean, sweet smell in the air. Down in the boggy meadow, just before nightfall, the little frogs sing so loud that you wonder if they are trying to make you believe the birds have come back.

The brook is getting a bright green border. The buds on the trees are so big that you feel sure in a few hours they must burst open. And you know that each new day may bring with it some happy surprise,—a bird, a leaf, or a flower that you have not seen for many a long month.

So when you find the willow branches set thick with silken pussies, you know that a happy time has begun, at least for you country children.

And even the city children learn to love these soft pussies when they are placed in tall vases on the teacher's desk.

If you look carefully at the different branches, you see that they bear different kinds of pussies; and your teacher will tell you, or perhaps you will discover yourselves, that these different branches were broken from different trees.

Do you know what each “pussy,” or tassel, is made up of?

Each tassel is made up of many tiny flowers.

But willow flowers are built on quite a different plan from cherry flowers. If you pick apart one of these tassels, and examine a single blossom, you will find it hard to believe that it is a flower at all.



On one branch the tassels are all golden yellow. The flowers that make up these

yellow tassels have neither flower leaves nor pistils. Each blossom has two stamens which are fastened to a little fringed leaf, and nothing more. Such a flower, much magnified, is given in the picture. The golden color comes from the yellow pollen which has been shaken from the dust boxes.

The other branch is covered with silvery green tassels. Each flower in these tassels is made up of a single pistil, which is also fastened to a little fringed leaf.

So you see the building plan used by one kind of pussy-willow flowers is nothing but two stamens; while the plan used by the other kind is still simpler, it is nothing but one pistil.

The golden dust is carried by the bees from the willows which bear dust boxes to those other willows whose flowers have only seedboxes.

When they have given to the bees their pollen, the yellow tassels fade away; but the silvery green tassels, on account of their seedboxes, grow large and ripe, turning into the fruit shown in the picture below; and this fruit is one of the kind which scatters its seeds abroad by fastening them to silky sails.



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