

WATTLE BASICS



Wattling is a traditional craft that's been used by European homeowners for centuries to build walls for houses and sheds and fencing to pen in sheep and other livestock. The technique of weaving together flexible branches and vines also can be used to create structures for gardens, such as trellises. Wattling takes just the natural resources you probably have on hand and a basic skill set. The result is something both useful and beautiful for your garden that you can be proud of making for yourself.

Raw Materials

A wattle fence is made up of two types of wood, uprights, or posts, and weavers. Posts are rigid branches that are about 1.5 inches in diameter. Weavers are less than an inch in diameter and flexible.

Willow and hazelwood trees are the source of branches commonly used by wattle-builders in the U.K., but you can use almost any new growth that is supple, durable, and less than an inch in diameter. Fruit trees, such as apples and pears, regularly produce new growth that works well.

If you cut just about any woody plant to the ground (*known as coppicing*), it will regenerate with long, straight shoots, or whips, that are perfect for weavers. The ideal length is 6 to 8 feet. Remove any leaves from the branches. Before beginning a wattle project, soak the whips in water for a couple of days so they become even more pliable.

Fence Panels

Wattle fence panels, called hurdles, let you define or section off parts of your yard and garden. You can build a hurdle in a single day. You'll need 30 or so 6-foot-long branches.

Put in posts. Get five rigid branches that are about 1.5 inches in diameter. With a small hatchet or large knife sharpen the bases of the posts to a point, then drive them into the ground about 14 inches apart and 12 inches deep.

Weave. Thread the whips in and out of the posts, allowing the ends to protrude. Alternate the weave of each new row by starting it on the opposite side of the post from the last row. After each branch is in place, push it down to the base of the fence.

Tie and tidy. When finished, clip off the ends of the whips. For extra stability, thread hemp string through the ends to further tighten the weave. Trim off any excess that is hanging past the uprights, leaving about 2 inches overage on each side to account for shifting and settling.

Container Trellis

You can use the wattle technique to build a sturdy and attractive tuteur, or trellis, for growing vines in a large container.

Circle of uprights. Insert whips into the soil upright equally spaced around the circumference of the pot. Leave enough room between them so you can reach into the center for planting.

First level. Take two of your longest whips, tie them together with twine at one end and thread them around one of the uprights. Continue to weave the two whips around each upright until you complete the circle.

Adding layers. Using only a single whip at a time, add a few more layers, alternating the weave as you go.

Tie the top. With the help of a friend, gently bend the uprights together at the top and tie the ends with twine. Once secured, you'll notice how strong and stable the structure is.

Strength and style. Add a few more spiral pieces for beauty and strength. Start one end in the soil and then weave them on a diagonal up through the structure.

Plant vines. Sweet or edible peas, morning glories, or nasturtiums will grow up and around the tuteur.

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