

Tree of the Month, April & May 2015: Golden weeping willow (*Salix × sepulcralis* var. *chrysocoma*)

Golden weeping willow (*Salix × sepulcralis* var. *chrysocoma*) is a common sight in parks in Vancouver and all across the temperate northern hemisphere. This moisture-loving tree is often planted near lakes or ponds, looking picturesque with its golden-green branches dangling over the water. This willow is fast-growing but short-lived, often surviving for only 40-75 years, and can grow to 15 m tall with a crown 15 m wide. The young new branches are bright yellow and smooth, and then the bark thickens and turns gray with age. The catkins and lance-shaped leaves emerge at the same time in spring.

Salix × sepulcralis var. *chrysocoma* was introduced to the horticultural trade in Germany in 1888; it is a hybrid between *Salix babylonica*, a weeping willow from China that was introduced to Europe in 1730, and golden willow, *Salix alba* var. *vitellina*, a frost-hardy willow native to Europe and central Asia. The hybrid combines the weeping form of *S. babylonica* with the hardiness and golden colour of *S. alba* var. *vitellina*, and soon became popular in temperate western gardens.

The name *sepulcralis* is from the Latin word *sepulcrum*, meaning grave or tomb – chosen perhaps because weeping willows were often carved onto headstones as a symbol of grief, morning and loss. *Chrysocoma* comes from the Greek words for golden hair, referring to the weeping golden branches.

The wood of golden weeping willow is quite brittle and the trees often lose branches after winter storms. At VanDusen we have two golden weeping willows growing along the northern shore of Heron Lake – one mature specimen, and a young one that was planted to replace an older tree that fell into the lake in 2014.