

ESPALIER, THE ART OF TRAINING TREES



Espalier is a horticultural art with practical benefits. By strategically managing the size and shape of trees, you can grow fruiting or flowering varieties in tight spaces. Growing trees next to walls provides them with more heat, which encourages the fruit to ripen faster. The branches of espalier trees are open, making them easy to care for and to harvest from. Espalier trees add an architectural element to gardens and look attractive in winter.

Training trees into espalier (*pronounced "ess-pal-YAY"*) sounds challenging, but with just a few guidelines any gardener can create their own living works of art. The process involves targeted pruning as the tree grows and guiding its branches into a pre-determined direction. Depending on the species, it takes about three to five years for an espalier tree to grow into a basic shape.

Patterns

Creating an espalier tree begins with choosing its final shape. There are **six common patterns**, with many variations on those shapes.

Cordon

For this most traditional form, the branches are trained to grow horizontally from opposite sides of one central trunk. A single cordon is known as a "rope." Multi-tier cordons may have three or five tiers of branches. (*Apple and pears growers often use cordons to manage their orchards.*)

Palmetto Verrier

Horizontal branches are guided upward to form a "U" shape.

Fan

Branches are angled at **45 degrees** to grow from a central trunk in a fan shape.

Candelabra

Several vertical branches are trained upward at regular intervals from a low horizontal branch coming off the central trunk.

Belgian Fence

Three or more V-shaped espaliers are woven together into a fence for a lattice effect.

Informal

Branches grow in their natural directions but are pruned so that the tree is on a flat plane against a wall or fence.

Trees

Almost any tree can be espaliered, but the best candidates have long, flexible branches that bear fruit or flowers.

Fruit

Apple and pear trees have been the most common choices for centuries, because they have supple, easily trained new growth; their spurs live for years producing fruit. Native crabapples bear beautiful flowers in spring and tart, red fruit later in the season. Fig, peach, and cherry trees work well for espalier, too.

Flowering

Eastern red bud, crape myrtle, and hollies are fast-growing and easy to manage. Bougainvillea, camellias, forsythia, witch hazel, and evergreens such as juniper can all be readily trained into espalier shapes.

Process

Get Whips

Start with small saplings, or whips, that are about three-eighths in diameter.

Against the Wall

Espalier can be done free-standing, but in most cases the trees are planted near a flat surface, such as stucco or brick walls and fences. The tree should be at least 8 inches from the flat surface to allow for growth and air movement. On either side of the tree, you set up posts with small gauge wire to which you will guide the branches as they grow. You can also anchor the wires to the wall or fence.



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Process cont.

Follow the Leader

When you clip the top of the central stem, known as the leader, shoots emerge from buds on the stem's sides and from the top. **You select one shoot on either side of the main trunk and let those grow out about 6 to 10 inches before you guide them to the wire.**

Tie Down

You can use expandable nursery tape or material from old nylon hosiery to hold branches to the wire as they harden.

Smart Cuts

When the first branches begin forming their own branches, you start training them by pruning them back to buds that face the direction you want the plant to grow. After the pattern is set, you continue to prune to remove any growth that detracts from your desired shape and keep the plant low enough for easy tending. The main pruning is done annually in late winter to early spring when the plant is dormant (*or after it flowers, if it is a spring bloomer*) to remove branches that don't fit the plan.

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[PHS McLean Library Tree Pruning Subject Guide](#)

[University of Wisconsin Extension: Espalier](#)

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