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An easy approach to ESPALIER

Train a fruit tree into a beautiful and practical form with just a few simple steps

MAILE ARNOLD

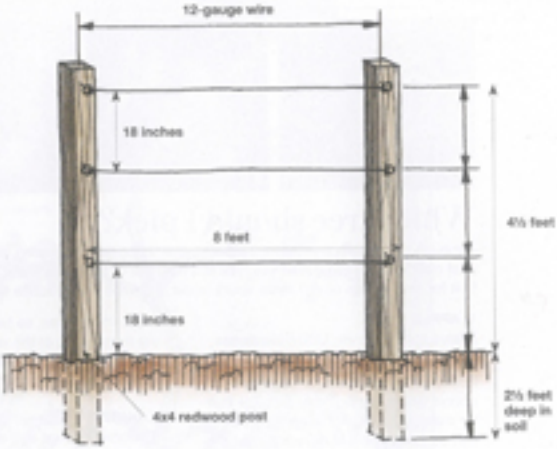
My clients often tell me that they would like to grow fruit trees but don't ecause they lack the space. Others mplain about a fence that needs to be oken up visually, or sometimes they ot want an interesting way to divide e area of the garden from another. he answer to each of these problems an espaliered fruit tree. Almost y tree can be trained into a two-imensional form. From Roman gardens French chateaux to Great Britain's tates, espaliered trees have been reading their limbs for centuries. espite its age-old pedigree, the espalier chnique is now more applicable than er, making it possible for us to nestle uit trees into modern small gardens here they otherwise wouldn't fit. Espaliered trees offer many conve-nces: The fruit can be harvested with-t ladders, pruning (essential with any uit tree) is easier because of the orga-ed growth, and trees—which would dinarily be too large—can nestle into a nfined space. Diseases also tend to be ndered by the openness of espaliered es, which permits lots of healthful flow. As if all this wasn't enough to n you into an espalier devotee, these es tend to fruit earlier because their ergy is directed into fruit production her than excessive growth. Harvesting fruit is also an organized and easy cess. On top of it all—and probably st important—espaliers are simply utiful. The espalier technique can be e in several ways to produce differ-t forms. The simplest is the horizontal don, and here's how you create it.

STEP 1

Prepare the trellis before planting the tree

I like to secure my trees and trellis with 4x4 redwood posts that are 8 feet long (although you can go longer for a taller espalier) for sturdiness. Sink the posts 2½ feet deep into the ground, and tamp the soil around them, setting the posts 8 feet apart. Install 4-inch-long eyebolts in the posts at regular intervals: 18 inches up from the ground, then at 36 inches, and finally at 54 inches.

Be sure to leave a 2-inch-wide space between the wooden post and the eyebolt: This is the gap where your tree's branches will grow. Run 12-gauge wire through the openings of the eyebolts, and pull tight. It helps to have turnbuckles (photo, right) at the end of each run to take up slack if the wire stretches. Each wire represents the path a branch will take as the tree grows into an espalier. This method will produce a three-armed espalier, but you can vary the setup to produce a two- or four-armed specimen, as well.



tip Keep tree height in check

When deciding how tall your tree will be, consider your own height; it's nice to keep things low enough to avoid dragging out ladders for maintenance and harvest.

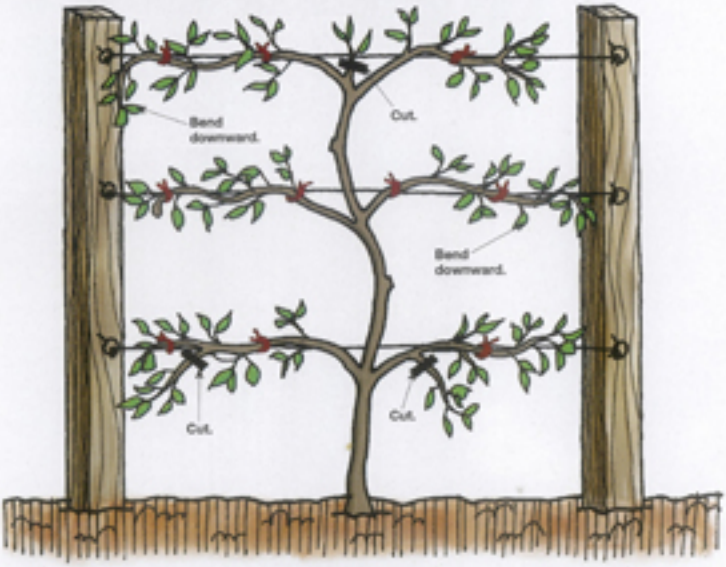
continued on page 42

EP 3

une judiciously maintain

ummer, the ls on the top of outstretched nches will start grow upward p photo, near ıt). In mid- ımer, cut these ns back, leav- behind only or three buds, ich will create ırs (bottom ɔto, near right). ese spurs will l and bear it for many ırs to come. Continue to the extending ıs to the wire, ving the tips , until they reach the desired gth (or the end of the trellis). en, tie the very tip of each arm th with the wire, or turn it so t it grows downward; this will se the growth. If any spurs uld grow downward, cut them so that they don't produce fruit l weigh down the limb. Cut the of the tree so that it is 2 to nches shorter than the topmost e. The dormant buds at the new of the tree should push out l create side branches.

Your tree should bear fruit by the ond or third year. Once that ppens, be sure to thin in early mmer (photo, far right), leaving ly one fruit per cluster. Loosen ties securing the branches to wire yearly so that the branches not girdled.

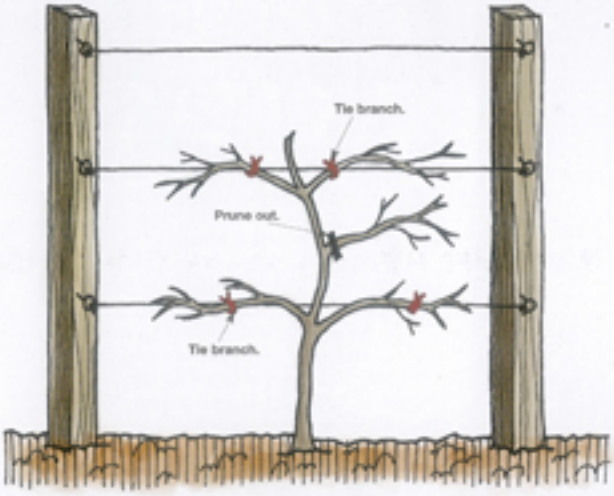


ile Arnold is a garden designer and espalier expert from Sebastopol, California.

tip

Time your cuts right

If a stem is pruned back to just above a bud in winter, it will force vigorous new growth in spring. If, however, a stem is pruned back in summer, it will become a spur that will produce fruit.



STEP 2

Plant and train your tree

In late fall or early spring, purchase a young bare-root fruit tree (sometimes called a "whip") on semidwarf rootstock; trees that are grafted on standard rootstock will be too vigorous. Look for the tallest possible whip. The best espaliers are pome fruits (sidebar, below).

Plant the tree dead center between the posts, aligned so that the branches will extend laterally with the wires you've strung. Prune off any branches that do not align with the wires.

Tie the branches, if there are any, to the wire using nursery tape, but leave the tips of the branches free to stick up. This will encourage the branch to continue to grow. If there are no branches on your tree, wait for them to grow and then tie or prune them as described.

Which tree should I pick?

Although the options may seem limitless when it comes to selecting what type of tree you'll buy at the nursery, the best option for an espalier of this type is a member of the pome fruits. This is because this group of trees continues to fruit for many years on the same spurs (short branches that produce flowers and fruit). Here are some of my favorites:

1. APPLE
(*Malus* spp. and cvs., USDA Hardiness Zones 3–9)

Possibly the most popular espalier option, apple trees reliably produce fruit for many seasons. Although the trees can be susceptible to several fungal diseases, including rust and black spot, good air circulation will mitigate the chance of an infection. Some varieties are self-pollinating, although even those thought to be self-fertile fruit better in the presence of a pollinator.

2. COMMON PEAR
(*Pyrus communis** cvs., Zones 5–9)

Pear trees vary in whether they can pollinate themselves, so be sure to check the nursery tag of the variety you wish to purchase. Pear trees are also thought to be less disease-prone than apple trees.

3. QUINCE
(*Cydonia oblonga* and cvs., Zones 5–9)

If you have a shady spot, quince is the fruit tree for you. This beautiful plant produces large white or pink flowers, which give way to orbs of tart fruit that are about the size of a small fist and somewhat resemble a green-yellow apple.

4. CRABAPPLE
(*Malus* spp. and cvs., Zones 3–9)

Although these ornamental trees produce lots of cherry-size fruit, like the cultivar 'Harvest Gold' (pictured), they are grown also for their gorgeous flowers. If you plant a crabapple tree for use as an espalier, select a cultivar that doesn't produce tons of suckers to lessen the amount of pruning.

5. ASIAN PEAR
(*Pyrus pyrifolia* and cvs., Zones 6–9)

Similar in looks to the common pear tree, this unique group of trees produces fruit that is golden yellow when ripe and touts a firmer (as well as sweeter) fruit. The heat tolerance of Asian pear trees makes them a good choice for those living in warm parts of the country.

*See invasive alert on page 86.

web EXTRA To see a video on creating an espalier, go to FineGardening.com/extras.