

1999

Weaving Dreams of Spring Gardens

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Recommended Citation

Hinkamp, Dennis, "Weaving Dreams of Spring Gardens" (1999). *All Archived Publications*. Paper 788.
http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/extension_histall/788

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GARDEN NOTES

WEAVING DREAMS OF SPRING GARDENS

By Dennis Hinkamp

January 1999

Winter-18

Some of the most grandiose ideas we have about gardening are born in the winter when our minds are active and our hands are idle. “Pleaching” is one of the stranger garden fantasies.

“Sometimes we get an itch to create something not found in nature that personifies our landscape,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. “In so doing we create art.”

During the time when the Roman Empire ruled much of the Old World, a few horticulturists decided to create their own art form, Goodspeed explains. Using plants as their medium, they intertwined branches of certain trees and shrubs creating living lattices, archways and screens. They called their work “pleaching”—which is Latin for “to weave.” As the branches and twigs of certain plants are woven, they graft onto each other, creating a self-supporting living lattice.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, pleaching lost favor and was not used much again until the 16th and 17th centuries, he says. The Dutch renewed an interest in this art form by pleaching plant hedges and arches around their cathedrals and government buildings. Many of these living structures can still be seen today throughout Europe.

“Today pleaching is once again gaining popularity,” Goodspeed says. “It is as much an art form today as it was when the Roman horticulturists were wondering what to do with their winters.”

Some trees and shrubs pleach easier than others, he says. The most common plants used for this procedure are hornbeams, hawthorns, beech, apple, pear and linden trees. They all have pliable branches that are easily woven.

“I saw a beautiful pleached beech arbor in Williamsburg, Virginia,” Goodspeed recalls. “The trees that were grown on about two-foot centers had grown until the branches could be bent over at the top and woven together. The lower branches were removed, giving the appearance of a wooden trellis with a vine growing over the top.”

“The easiest way to pleach is to build a temporary trellis or structure to train the plants as they grow on or over it,” he explains. “As the plants grow and the branches overlap, they can be woven together in a desired pattern. Over time, they graft together and form a living trellis. The

support structure can then be removed.”

Some pleaching is accomplished by literally grafting the living branches together at the beginning, he says. Where the wood intersects, both branches are scored, or cut, and this area is secured together using rubber bands or other materials that eventually decompose. The grafted joint is sealed with wax to keep it from drying out.

Pleaching can create an interesting arbor, archway or a trellis over a patio, Goodspeed says.

“I have seen it used to design an upright checkerboard pattern, or line a pathway,” he says. “Pleaching can be an enjoyable activity that adds a little personality to the landscape, but it definitely is more fun to imagine than to accomplish.”

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 9 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert L. Gilliland, Vice-President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University, Logan, Utah. (EP/01/1999/DF)