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Pruning - Keeping Your Plants on a Short Leash

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GARDEN NOTES

PRUNING - KEEPING YOUR PLANTS ON A SHORT LEASH

By Dennis Hinkamp

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You think it is hard to house train a dog? Try growing an apple tree in the shape of Elvis's head.

“Espaliered’ is a fancy name for training various plants to grow in the shape you want rather than the shape they want. Espalier is the framework used to train a plant to a two-dimensional pattern, such as along a fence, wall or trellis, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist.

“My first experience with espaliered plants was in Europe. I visited an old cathedral that had a garden area surrounded by espaliered trees. These pear trees, with the fruit just beginning to set, gave the garden a very formal and majestic appearance,’ Goodspeed says.

“I am not sure when people started manipulating the growth habit of trees, but it was popular during the medieval ages. Espaliered plants are found around many European castles, cathedrals, monasteries and formal gardens. Apple and pear trees were the most popular varieties, but any limber tree or plant can be used.”

He says espaliering plants is again becoming popular. Gardeners are re-discovering and enjoying this true art form. Aside from the beauty, the advantages of espaliering trees is that they require less space to provide fruit and they make a softer screen or fence than wood or brick.

Some of the more popular plants to try espaliering include apples, pears, cotoneasters, burning bush, forsythia, holly, mock orange, viburnum, and yews. Another advantage of espaliering fruit trees is it makes spraying and harvesting the fruit easier, he says.

However, before ever beginning to espalier a plant, consider the time, effort and expense associated with the hobby, Goodspeed warns. Espaliered plants require a trellis or some other type of support, extra training and pruning and considerable foresight into the end product.

He says espaliered plants need to be placed with the proper sun exposure in mind. If a plant is going to be trained against a wall, be sure it will receive sufficient light. A north or east facing wall may be suitable for shade loving plants, but will restrict the growth of most trees. Walls also radiate heat back to the plant. This can cause some sunburning, but may also decrease the time required for fruit production.

Whether on a wall or fence, Goodspeed says the plants need some type of support to help them maintain their shape. This is especially important when the plants are young. Remember that most plants are stubborn, and it takes a good strong wire or fence to get them to conform to the desired shape.

“Fasten the plants to the support system when they are young,” Goodspeed says. “This helps establish the framework.”

He suggests tying branches loosely, making certain they have room to grow and expand. Tight wires can easily girdle and kill a branch. Move ties every three to four months to make sure they are not restricting growth on the branch. Twine tied loosely, or twist ties, like those used to tie garbage bags, work well.

“Once the plant starts to grow, shape it every month or two. Remove branches or twigs growing out of place, and retie stray branches. Spring is a good time to do major pruning. Retie all the branches in late fall right before the tree goes dormant. The sap is still flowing, and the wood is limber enough to move and shape. After winter, most of the wood is set and harder to shape,” Goodspeed says.

He says it’s difficult to explain in writing all the tricks and procedures, but there are many books with photographs that can give you a better picture of the various stages of the process.

For more information, contact your local [USU County Extension office](#).

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