

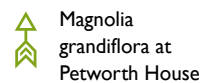


GARDEN



STRUCTURED CANOPIES: PLEACHED AND ESPALIER TREES

Structuring tree canopies is a practical way to add form to a garden. Pleaching and espalier training are methods that are especially useful in gardens of listed buildings, where space might be limited or where the introduction of large trees could obstruct the architectural features of the property.



Magnolia grandiflora at Petworth House



Espalier

These techniques are particularly effective for lining pathways or for creating screening and privacy. Given the often formal or symmetrical designs of many historical buildings, pleached and espalier trees can mirror this style while also serving practical purposes such as softening hard lines and creating structure without overcrowding.

PLEACHING

Pleached trees can be used to create living barriers, offering a solution where traditional fencing or walls may clash with the character of a property. Pleaching, often referred to as 'hedges on stilts', is a horticultural technique

that involves tree branches trained horizontally on a frame and interwoven with the branches of neighbouring trees, to create a living, woven effect. A succession of pleached trees can be used to create a seamless screen that defines a space while still allowing light to filter through.

The foliage is typically clipped and shaped into three-dimensional blocks, resulting in a uniform, architectural appearance. A looser, more natural habit is possible, but some degree of clipping and shaping is always required to maintain the woven effect and prevent the trees from growing to their natural tree form. All pleach trees have a clear stem and are available as ready trained specimens from specialist plant nurseries. The clear stem measurement depends on the intended purpose and the required overall height. Pleaching can be



Pleached Hornbeam at Hidcote Manor Garden



Ginkgo biloba espalier



Fan trained tree



achieved with a variety of trees and shrubs, though it is most commonly associated with deciduous species like Hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*), Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and Lime (*Tilia* sp.), all of which have flexible branches well suited to training.

A robust evergreen option is Oleaster (*Elaeagnus x ebbengei*), valued for its fast growth and tolerance of challenging conditions. Although often planted as a shrub in municipal settings, when clipped and trained as a pleached tree it becomes an elegant feature with the bonus of highly fragrant (though inconspicuous) flowers. Other good evergreen options include Japanese Privet (*Ligustrum japonicum*), Holm Oak (*Quercus ilex*), evergreen Magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) and Holly (*Ilex* 'Nellie R. Stevens').

ESPALIER

The term 'espalier' is a French word meaning 'something to rest the shoulder against' and is a method made famous in the 17th century gardens of Versailles, though it is believed to date back to ancient Egypt.



Espalier technique involves training fruit producing trees that were originally grown flat against the protection of a wall for protection from cold winds. The lateral branching structure maximises exposure to sunlight, which in turn yields more fruit. Unlike pleaching, espaliered plants do not intertwine with neighbouring trees. While they can be planted in a line, each specimen remains structurally independent.

Today, we carry on the tradition of pruning trees or shrubs to grow flat, usually against a wall or fixed structure. Branches are trained horizontally and spaced at regular intervals from a central stem, typically in three or four tiers, forming a symmetrical pattern, a design feature common in classical and Georgian architecture.

Apples and pear trees are most successfully grown in this way. Ornamental species can also be trained, including Maidenhair Tree (*Ginkgo biloba*) prized for its distinctive fan-shaped leaves, and evergreen Firethorn (*Pyracantha* sp.), which offers flowers and berries (though its thorns require consideration). There are more elaborate variations of espalier that incorporate fan shapes or geometric patterns. These forms

are particularly suitable for quince and fig and stone fruit such as cherry and plum trees, as the structure better suits their growing habit.

Espaliers can be incorporated into gardens of any size, even the smallest spaces. They are ideal for softening a fence or creating subtle divisions between areas. Ready-made specimens are widely available, or with some wire supports, hooks and a bit of time and patience, it is possible to plant and train your own.

These versatile and practical techniques are adaptable to gardens of all sizes. Pleaching provides architectural structure, privacy and boundary definition whilst espalier creates living walls and enables fruit cultivation.

Incorporating pleaching and espalier training techniques is an excellent way of bringing trees into gardens and creating structure without compromising the integrity of a garden of a listed building or overwhelming a garden space. By training plants to grow vertically and horizontally, ground space is freed up for underplanting allowing further layers of interest into the garden. These methods allow for creative, controlled planting that complements the formal and structured nature of heritage gardens while providing privacy and space-saving benefits. With some thoughtful layout and design, these tree training methods can become an integral part of a garden design and enhancement around listed buildings.

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