

Espaliers¹

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Figure 1. Espaliered pear tree (*Pyrus communis*), in the garden of the Cloisters in upper Manhattan.

Credits: © 2004 Matthew Trump, CC BY-SA 3.0

An “espalier,” (pronounced “es-PAL-yer” or “es-pal-YAY”) is any plant trained to grow in a flat plane against a wall, fence, or trellis. The word *espalier* also may be used to describe the technique of training a plant to this flat plane. The Romans originated the technique, but later generations of Europeans refined it into an exacting but rewarding art.

The espalier has considerable merit in today’s garden. The practice originally was used in the old world to conserve space. The English located espaliered fruit trees against a wall with a southern exposure for cold protection. Today,

espaliers are used mostly for decorative accents in the landscape.

An espalier is a living sculpture in the garden and is especially effective against a blank wall as an alternative to a monotonous row of shrubs. An espalier is also a good choice for a narrow area where spreading shrubs or trees cannot be easily maintained. With landscape spaces becoming smaller around homes, an espaliered plant may have considerable appeal.

From Ornamentals to Espaliers

Almost any plant can be espaliered by continually directing growth along a flat plane and removing growth in undesired directions. Some plants are particularly suitable as espaliers, especially ones that produce many flexible lateral branches and attractive flowers, fruit, foliage, and/or bark. The plants listed in Tables 1–3 are only suggestions and are not intended to be inclusive. Other plants are worth trying and may prove to be equal to, if not better than, those listed.

Selecting an Espalier Pattern

The choice of a pattern for an espalier greatly influences plant selection and maintenance. Many plant species are suited for informal or free-form patterns, but only a few are suited to formal, symmetrical shapes. Tables 1, 2, and 3 suggest plants suited for formal patterns. Before purchasing a plant, make a sketch of your espalier pattern and ask a knowledgeable nursery professional, a horticulturist, or

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your local [UF/IFAS Extension office](#) for help in selecting a plant that can be trained to this pattern.

Training an espalier can require many hours of maintenance. Pre-trained espaliers are available in the nursery trade and make it easier and faster for the average gardener to have an elaborate espalier. The formal patterns illustrated below in Figure 2 are for those people who like to clip and prune.

Formal Patterns

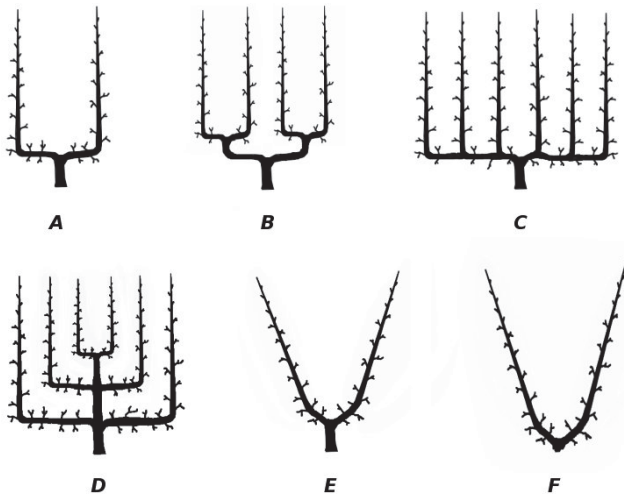


Figure 2. Formal espalier patterns.
Credits: Giancarlo Dessi (CC BY-SA 3.0)

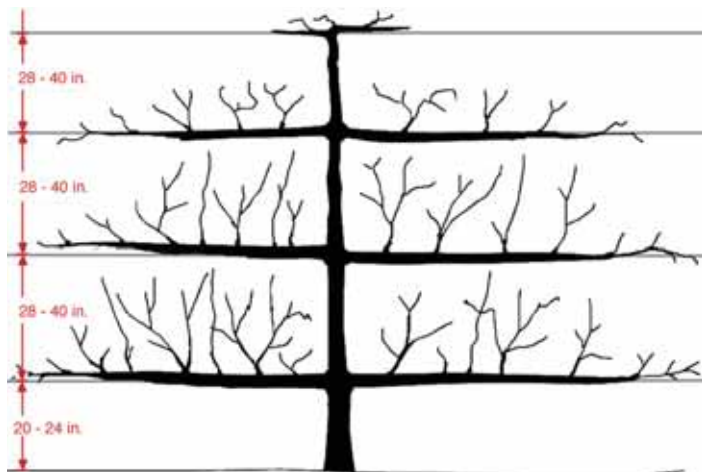


Figure 3. Espalier with horizontal branches.
Credits: Giancarlo Dessi (CC BY-SA 3.0)

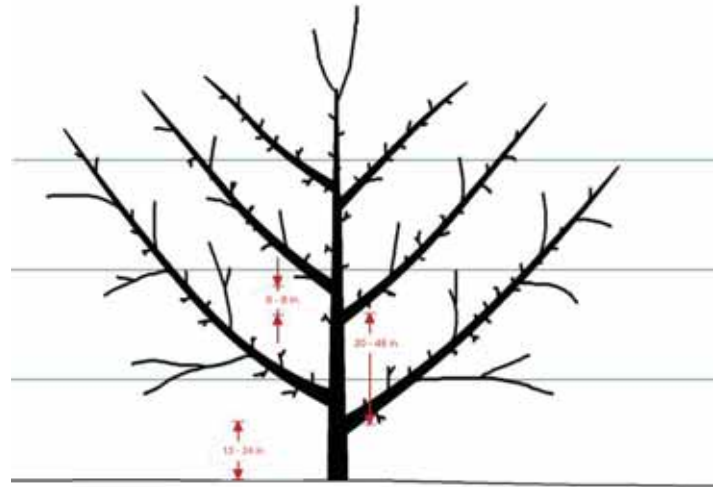


Figure 4. Espalier with upward-slanting branches.
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Informal Patterns

There are no rigid patterns to follow when developing an informal espalier. Plants can be allowed to grow into their natural shapes or they can be trained into free-form designs limited only by imagination and pruning skills (Figure 5). Informal espaliers usually do not require the kind of framework given to formal patterns; however, most need some means of support, at least until they are established.



Figure 5.
Credits: Dmitry Naumov/istockphoto.com

Supporting Espaliers

Formal espaliers usually need a trellis or some other framework for support. The framework also provides a guide for training branches and serves to create the illusion of a complete espalier long before a plant is trained to a particular pattern. Wooden trellises should be constructed of rot-resistant woods such as cypress, cedar, redwood, or pressure-treated lumber. The support framework should be placed next to a wall or fence before installing the plant to be espaliered. When an espalier serves as a screen,

construct a free-standing support framework consisting of sturdy terminal posts with wires stretched taut between them. Informal espaliers usually do not require the kind of framework given to formal patterns; however, most need some means of support, at least until they are established.

When espaliers are grown against a wall without a supporting framework it is advisable to keep the plant 6 to 8 inches (15.2 to 20.3 cm) from the wall. This is particularly important on wooden walls where good air circulation helps prevent mildew, staining, and decaying of wooden siding. The space also facilitates training (tying, pruning, etc.), spraying for pests, and maintenance of the building (painting). Finally, leaving space creates interesting shadow patterns that add depth and interest to the espalier. Eye bolts may be used to attach a plant 6 to 8 inches (15.2 to 20.3 cm) from a wall.

Attach plants directly to masonry walls with anchoring devices such as masonry staples or concrete nails. Zinc or plastic anchors may be placed in mortared joints between concrete blocks or bricks and eye screws inserted. You may also glue vine ties (small discs with a short wire embedded) to masonry or wooden walls. These discs are easy to install but are suitable only for small specimens and are not as permanent as devices anchored in a wall. If vine ties are used, the ties should be loosened periodically to prevent the wire from girdling a branch.

Planting and Training Espaliers

Once you have selected a plant, pattern, and support framework, the next step is plant installation. Plants to be espaliered should be planted 6 to 8 inches (15.2 to 20.3 cm) from the wall or support framework in well-drained soil. Often, the soil at the base of a wall contains building debris such as concrete or stucco which should be removed and replaced with a better soil containing organic matter such as peat, compost, or manure.

Dig a hole one foot (30.4 cm) wider than the root ball of the plant. Backfill the hole with enough soil so that the plant sits in the hole with top of the root ball level with the top of the hole. Firm the soil in the bottom of the hole to prevent settling. Gently place the plant straight in the hole and fill around the roots with soil. Water thoroughly while planting to remove air pockets. Apply a 2- to 3-inch organic mulch to conserve moisture and help to control weeds.

The training technique used will depend on the pattern selected and the number of laterals on the plant. If you are following a design, carefully bend the branches into

the desired positions and tie them into place. Remove all unwanted laterals or branches. If a design with a dominant main shoot is used, do not cut the top of the main shoot until the desired height is reached. A design with pronounced lateral growth requires that the terminal be cut at the level of the first branching, usually 15 to 18 inches (0.4 to 0.5 m) from the ground.

To maintain an espalier, prune and tie new shoots to conform to the desired pattern. Prune all stray branches that grow outward at right angles to the flat surface and those that grow beyond the boundaries of the desired pattern. Be careful to prune flowering shrubs and trees during the proper season.

Table 1. Suggested trees for espaliers.

Botanical name Common Name	Section of State¹	Leaf Persistence	Light Requirements	Basic Pattern
<i>Cercis canadensis</i> Red bud	N-C	Deciduous	Full sun/partial shade	Informal
Comment: Rose flowers in early spring.				
<i>Citrus</i> spp. Citrus	C-S	Evergreen	Full sun	Informal
Comment: White, fragrant flowers in spring and colorful fruit in fall or winter.				
<i>Coccoloba uvifera</i> Sea grape	S	Evergreen	Full sun/partial shade	Formal/informal
Comment: Large evergreen leaves and small purple fruit.				
<i>Eriobotrya japonica</i> Loquat	N-C-S	Evergreen	Full sun	Formal/informal
Comment: White, fragrant flowers in winter and yellow fruit in spring.				
<i>Lagerstroemia indica</i> Crape myrtle	N-C-S	Deciduous	Full sun	Informal
Comment: White, pink, red or purple flowers in late spring and early summer; attractive, sculptured branches and mottled bark.				
<i>Ilex</i> spp. Hollies	N-C-S	Evergreen	Full sun	Formal
Comment: Many species are suitable depending on the size desired. Red berries in the fall/winter on female plants.				
<i>Magnolia grandiflora</i>	N-C	Evergreen	Full sun	Formal/informal
Comment: Leaves are large, glossy dark green with brown pubescence underneath. Smaller-leaved cultivars, such as 'Little Gem' and others, are available.				
<i>Malus</i> spp. Apple, southern crabapple	N	Deciduous	Full sun	Formal/informal
Comment: Pink, fragrant flowers borne in profusion in early spring.				
<i>Prunus</i> spp. Peach, nectarine, plum	N	Deciduous	Full sun	Formal/informal
Comment: Flowers in spring and fruit in summer.				
¹ N = north Florida (Pensacola to Jacksonville and south to Ocala); C = central Florida (Leesburg south to Punta Gorda and Fort Pierce); S = south Florida (Stuart to Ft. Myers and south to Homestead); N-C-S = entire state				

Table 2. Suggested shrubs for espaliers.

Botanical name Common Name	Section of State¹	Leaf Persistence	Light Requirements	Basic Pattern
<i>Camellia japonica</i> and <i>C. sasanqua</i> Camellias	N-C	Evergreen	Partial shade	Formal/informal
Comment: Wide variety of flower forms and colors; <i>C. sasanqua</i> and early varieties <i>C. japonica</i> bloom in the fall; Mid-and late-season varieties of <i>C. japonica</i> bloom in the winter and spring.				
<i>Carissa macrocarpa</i> Natal plum	C-S	Evergreen	Full sun/partial shade	Informal
Comment: White flowers in spring and attractive, scarlet fruit in summer.				
<i>Gardenia jasminoides</i> Gardenia	N-C-S	Evergreen	Full sun/partial shade	Informal
Comment: White, fragrant flowers in spring; white flies and sooty mold are major problems; should be grafted on <i>G. thunbergia</i> rootstock in central and south Florida for resistance to nematodes.				
<i>Juniperus</i> spp. Juniper	N-C-S	Evergreen	Full sun	Formal or informal
Comment: Hundreds of cultivars are available in many shades of green, blue, and gray. Need well-drained soils; very heat and drought tolerant				
<i>Ligustrum japonicum</i> Ligustrum	N-C-S	Evergreen	Full sun/partial shade	Informal
Comment: White, small, odorous flowers in spring.				
<i>Photinia glabra</i> Redtip photinia	N	Evergreen	Full sun	Informal
Comment: <i>Photinia x fraseri</i> is an excellent hybrid. Leaf spots are often an unsightly problem.				
<i>Podocarpus</i> spp.	N-C-S	Evergreen	Full sun	Formal/informal
Comment: Both the weeping podocarpus (<i>P. gracilior</i>) and <i>P. macrophyllus</i> are suitable for espaliers. <i>P. gracilior</i> is cold tender and can only be grown in south Florida and protected locations in central Florida.				
<i>Pyracantha coccinea</i> Pyracantha	N-C-S	Evergreen	Full sun	Formal/informal
Comment: White flowers in spring followed by orange-red berries in fall and winter.				
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Table 3. A few suggested vines for espaliers.

Botanical name Common Name¹	Section of State²	Leaf Persistence	Light Requirements	Basic Pattern
<i>Allamanda cathartica</i> Allamanda	C-S	Evergreen	Full sun	Informal
Comment: Large, yellow, trumpet-shaped flowers throughout most of the year in south Florida.				
<i>Ficus pumila</i> Climbing or creeping fig	N-C-S	Evergreen	Full sun / partial shade	Informal
Comment: Clings by aerial rootlets; should be used only on masonry walls.				
<i>Trachelospermum jasminoides</i> Confederate jasmine	N-C-S	Evergreen	Full sun / partial shade	Informal
Comment: White, fragrant, star-shaped flowers in bloom from April to May.				
¹ For others, see EDIS publication CIR860 Flowering Vines for Florida				
² N = north Florida (Pensacola to Jacksonville and south to Ocala); C = central Florida (Leesburg south to Punta Gorda and Fort Pierce); S = south Florida (Stuart to Ft. Myers and south to Homestead); N-C-S = entire state				