



Growing Up

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Has your garden reached a plateau? Is your patio over the top with potted plants? Are you ready to try something different? Rejuvenate your creative impulses, enhance your joy for gardening, and add pizzazz to your landscape by going vertical with espaliers.



During the Roman Empire, fruit trees were trained to grow against a walled garden to save space and provide protection from cold weather. In Medieval Europe, monks produced their grapes to make communion wine by growing grapevines against a sun-baked wall of their monastery. The French refined the method of training trees and shrubs by forcing them to grow in a flat plane and called it espalier (es-PAL-ya), meaning to “shoulder” the plant against a wall. By the 17th century, it had become an art form.



Espaliers can have either an informal, free-form design or a formal pattern. The first one I planted was in the shape of an arrowhead. My family had just built a weekend cabin where many arrowheads have been found. It was a fitting design for our house. Although uniform in shape, the triangle is not a traditional pattern found in garden design books. I used pyracantha (*Pyracantha coccinea*), a fast growing plant that grows well in Pensacola. When the pyracantha had completely grown into the shape, it became a delightful focal point. It has a bit of flair even though it is symmetrical. The side of the house is no longer a blank wall looming over the shrubs planted at its feet. An added attraction is the fire red berries produced from the tiny clusters of white flowers in the spring.

The Losange, a version of the Belgian fence pattern, is the one I chose to use for my chimney, which is adjacent to my patio. I desperately needed to do something to alleviate the monotony of the bare brick wall. This design is a lattice pattern in which the branches crisscross at a 45-degree angle. I planted a dwarf orient pear tree (*Pyrus pyrifolia* 'Orient'). Not as fast growing as the pyracantha, it has taken a number of years to complete the pattern.



On the wooden privacy fence that faces the street, I chose a repeating “X” pattern of ivy (a hybrid of *Hedera helix*). I did this several years ago before I learned how invasive ivy could be. I love the design but if I were to do it over again I would have planted confederate jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*).

Less demanding than their counterpart, informal designs require pruning ability and an imagination. Strict framework is not necessary, but support is important. With the free-form style I planted for my parents, all I needed were masonry nails and ties to attach the pliable sasanqua (*Camellia sasanqua*) limbs to the brick wall wherever my creative spirit and aesthetic sense decided. The pruning I did was to give it an open and airy feel to it.

Depending on the vitality of your plant, more sturdy or durable materials may be necessary for the formal pattern. I used leftover TV cable on a cedar wall for the arrowhead espalier, which I was glad I did because *pyracantha* is strong and vigorous. Build your framework (design) on a sturdy support, i.e., wall, fence, strong trellis, or posts by tautly stringing heavy wire (at least 12-15 gauge) through eyebolts or around nails on the support. Strategically placed eyebolts or



nails create the design and ensure the support once the plant starts growing. The framework is the guide for training the plant and provides the picture before it has completed its growth.

To begin training the plant, remove any branches that do not fit the design, however, do not cut the leader (center) shoot until the plant has reached the desired height. Gently (key word) bend the lateral branches to the wire and tie with soft string, raffia, cloth, or plant ties. New growth is more flexible, so it is best to do your manipulating while the branch is still pliable. Prune every month or so, cutting back any dissident growth.

As the new verdant shoots take off to fill in your design, you will find yourself watching it as if it were a newborn baby. It will become your pride and joy. As much time as we Pensacolians spend living and entertaining outdoors, this landscape feature is worth the effort, and will surely cause green thumb envy in the hearts of your fellow gardening guests. In addition, just when you think your espalier is looking its best, try lighting it up during the holidays. Talk about pizzazz! As with any form of art, it provides joy for all.



[Sidebar]

Formal Patterns

Many plants work well with informal patterns, while only a few are suited for the formal, symmetrical designs. Before selecting your plant, decide upon your espalier form. R.J. Black and T.H. Yeager of the University of Florida IFAS provide detailed descriptions of designs, also, how to grow and maintain them in their Circular 627 article, *Espaliers*, (published in May 1985, and recently revised in June 2004) on their EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.



Of the traditional designs, there are several from which to choose, ranging from simple to elaborate.

- § **Single or tiered cordon**

- § **U- shaped or candelabra**

- § **Palmette – verrier and oblique**

- § **Belgian Fence**



[Sidebar]

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Some suggested plants for our coastal region that work well with formal or informal espaliers:

- 1) Loquat (*Eriobotrya japonica*) - evergreen /full sun

- 2) Southern crabapple (*Malus angustifolia*) - deciduous/full sun

- 3) Peach, nectarine, plum (*Prunus* spp.)- Deciduous/full sun

- 4) Camellia (*Camellia japonica*) - evergreen/partial shade



5) Sasanqua (*Camellia sasanqua*)- evergreen/partial shade

6) Ligustrum (*Ligustrum japonicum*) – evergreen/Full sun/partial shade

7) Redtip Photinia (*Photinia glabra*) - evergreen/full sun

8) Pyracantha (*Pyracantha coccinea*) - evergreen/ full sun

9) Confederate jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*)-evergreen/full sun/partial shade

10) Pear (*Pyrus Pyrifolia*)- deciduous/ full sun

11) Red bud (*Cercis Canadensis*) - deciduous/ full sun / partial shade

12) Crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*) - deciduous /full sun