



Transcript

Arts, Literature and Music

A Good Read

Espalier: Beautiful, Productive Garden Walls and Fences

By Allen Gilbert

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In today's small gardens – our havens of private space – it makes sense to aim for planting which is cunningly arranged. A garden where you have space for a few fruit trees as nothing tastes better than home picked fruit. Imagine lots of shade in summer and hot west facing walls draped with cooling greenery.

The ancient walled gardens of Iran were known for just such spaces. Maybe earlier people created a kind of Espalier, but it is the Persians who are first credited with this art. *Espalier* is the art of training trees into two-dimensional shapes or flat plane designs. In Europe espalier became fashionable during the Middle Ages and beyond. And today, we can adapt this shaping of plants to our own good use.

What I like about Allan Gilbert's book is that he knows what will work for Australian conditions. Gilbert is a respected horticulturalist and once ran an orchard in Tasmania. This is where he experimented with espalier – on apple, pear and almond trees. He also traveled to European old gardens and there are many good photos in the book.

One photo in particular resonated with me – it is a low wall of greenery, a delicious barrier made up of one apple tree. It astonished me – shaping a big tree into a cooling low green wall. It could hedge the vegetable garden and imagine how merry it would look with the growing apples over summer? Yes, fruit trees, no matter their shape or height, still bear normal sized fruit. Another good idea of Gilbert's is to plant a suitable fruit tree into a giant tub and then train the tree into a tall column. You get to dictate the space, rather than letting the vegetation run wild and taking over the best sunny spots in the garden.

Commercial market gardens and orchards use espalier-type techniques today. In our market gardening suburbs such as Virginia, tomatoes, capsicums and eggplants are carefully shaped into high-density planting. Some gardeners prefer to create a walk-under trellis system; others prefer long walls of side branching plants. Both systems offer compact easy fruit picking shapes. The technique can get confusing, Long laterals, side laterals, multiple cordons – all types of shaping. But it all makes sense – you control the plant's unruly growth into systematic side growth. You guide the growth with strong twine or wire. You need to have a plan.

And maybe this is the Achilles' heel of this gardening art – you need have a plan, self-discipline and allow time to train the plant in the beginning and then periodically throughout its life. I can see this art of espalier becoming an occasional soothing ritual for tired workers. A giant bonsai, if you like. It is certainly creative and definitely useful for the whole household.

Espalier: beautiful, productive garden walls and fences has 6 chapters. The 2nd chapter has photos of design from all over the world, along with clear drawings of the basic shapes. The tunnel shape work so well with grape vines – I grew up playing under a shady vine arbor and remember hanging my dolly washing along the wire supports. In the Adelaide Botanic Gardens you can walk through the old Wisteria Walk and marvel at the design. You can also create heart or fan shaped flat designs which work well against a tall brick wall.

Chapter 3 details the shaping of walls, frames and trellises. The later are useful for creating compact fruit trees. Instead of 1 or 2 big fruit trees in the corners of your backyard, you can plant and shape 4 low trees into one mass based on the capital letters T or Y. It looks rather like a tall grapevine in the vineyard. The trees are held in shape by frames of strong wire and sturdy posts or frames at either end. The idea is that you have good air circulation at the base; the fruit is at picking height and sheltered from hot winds. The whole mass can be easily netted with long fine mesh from birds or possums.

Allen Gilbert's book also gives a whole chapter on selecting the right plants for espalier. Australia's longer, sunnier summers means that we have a greater variety to select from than in the northern hemisphere. Good plants should be able to be bent slowly into shape. Brittle branches are unsuitable. Australian plants are often hardy and tolerate heavy pruning. Bottlebrush, Grevillea, Correa and Erimophila species work well and have low water needs.

Citrus trees, such as lemon and oranges, are suitable for shaping into flat planes for compact yards. Climbing roses need to be shaped to control them, so why not make them work for a living? A western wall of the house would be perfect for an espalier frame. The house will be kept cool from the afternoon sun, the rose will enjoy the hot conditions and in winter the bare plant will allow sun onto the house wall.

Allen Gilbert has also written a sensible book about citrus growing called simply *Citrus*. You may have heard him as a radio talk-back presenter advising on organic gardening. He now lives in a Tasmanian country town and continues to experiment in his highly productive garden block. Espalier can be made complex but Gilbert encourages us ordinary Australian gardeners to shape our own havens of private space into walls of greenery, flowers and fruit.

The book reviewed today is *Espalier: beautiful, productive garden walls and fences* by Allen Gilbert. Published by Hyland House in 2009.