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## Espaliered Fruit Trees

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### Espaliered fruit trees are a good fit for the smaller yard.

#### SUMMARY

If you have a spot with enough sun, fruit trees can be grown even in the smallest of yards by using a centuries-old pruning and training technique known as espalier (ess-pahl-yay). Apples or pears are easiest for the beginner, and can even be obtained “pre-trained”.

*Q: I would like to grow fruit trees in my back yard, but the yard is very small. A friend suggested that I grow espaliered trees. How do I get started?*

A: Having a small yard need not deter you from growing fruit trees. When pruned as an espalier, a fruit tree will grow in a flat plane against a fence or wall and occupy little yard space. Despite the minimal space they need, espaliered fruit trees can produce abundant harvests.

#### Location, Location, Location:

Start by choosing a location for the tree. Fruit trees require at least six hours of sun. If you live in an area where summer daytime temperatures regularly exceed 90 degrees, look for an east facing fence or wall or another location that has good morning sun but shade in the heat of the day. In cooler climates, espaliered trees can be grown against a south or west facing fence or wall. Plan for about seven feet of width for the mature tree. Check for good drainage.

#### Consider Apples, Pears at First:

If you are growing your first espalier, consider an apple or pear tree. These trees produce fruit on the same fruiting spurs year after year, allowing you to easily maintain the espalier framework. Other fruit trees, including peaches, nectarines, apricots, cherries, figs and citrus can be grown in the espalier style, but proper annual pruning of these trees is more complicated than for apples or pears.

#### Getting Good Fruit Set:

Apple and pear trees need cross-pollination for best fruit set. This requirement means that you need to have at least two different apple varieties or two different pear varieties that bloom at the same time in relatively close proximity to each other. Multiple varieties of apples or pears can be grafted onto the same tree to provide for cross-pollination. Or you can plant two trees. Check with your nursery supplier to confirm that the varieties you choose are compatible. Dwarfing rootstock makes it easier to maintain the espalier shape.



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**Pre-Trained Trees Available:**

Many nurseries sell apple and pear trees that have already been trained into an espalier shape. If you select this type of tree, you can plant it just like you would plant any other small fruit tree. Your main task then becomes one of maintaining the basic shape and encouraging the development of more fruiting spurs. If you are more adventuresome, you can plant young bare-root apple or pear trees early next spring and train the trees to grow in espalier shapes.

**Wire Support System Needed:**

Whether you start with a pre-shaped tree or plan to shape a tree yourself, you’ll need a wire trellis system to support the tree branches. Heavy 14-gauge wire can be attached directly to a fence or wall with eye bolts, or you can erect a free-standing trellis made of pipe or wooden posts.

**Espalier Shapes:**

Many different espalier shapes can be used. For your first espalier tree, start with a simple shape. Espaliered apples and pears started by nurseries often have two or three horizontal cordons. U or Double U shapes are also good choices for apples and pears.

**For More Information:**

The University of Florida Cooperative Extension has published an excellent article with detailed instructions on training espaliered trees. Find it at: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/MG/MG27300.pdf>

For advice on caring for fruit trees, see The California Backyard Orchard at: <http://homeorchard.ucanr.edu>



Photo: Jack Kelly Clark, courtesy of University of California Statewide IPM Program