

Training apples and pears

GWF478
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Training apples and pears against walls and fences can look very attractive, is easier than you may think, and allows you to fit more varieties into your garden.

Fences and walls protect fruit trees from cold winds, while reflecting warmth and light. They also make it easy to fit netting or insulation to protect against birds and frosts. Training branches to grow out rather than up also means more of the tree's energy goes into producing fruit rather than foliage. Fruit yields should be high once trees have matured. Trees grown against a single 1.8 x 1.8m fence panel can yield 5kg of fruit a year.

Providing support

Trained fruit trees need support from horizontal wires across the face of the fence or wall or between posts. Many fruit trees can produce crops for 20 years or more, so the structure should be strong and durable. Use heavy-duty

(gauge 14 or 16) galvanised fencing wire, pulled taut between straining bolts. On a wall, use screw-in or hammer-in vine eyes to support the wires. Get the longest you can - 15cm if possible - so air can circulate behind the trees to reduce disease problems. On a robust fence, fix vine eyes into the posts. Otherwise, use new, pressure-treated fence posts 1.8-3m apart, in front of the fence. Fix the first wire 30cm off the ground then the others 45cm apart. Stepovers are trained on a single wire fixed at 30cm.

Buying plants

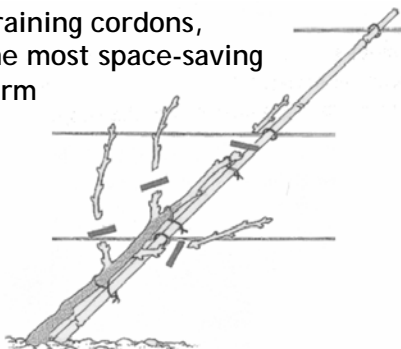
To train your own apples and pears you need to start with a one-year old tree - known as a maiden. This may have side-branches called feathers which are an advantage if

you are training a cordon, as the tree will fruit quicker than an unbranched one (called a whip). For stepovers and espaliers a whip is preferable so you can encourage side branches where you want them. A few garden centres, and many specialists, do sell partially trained trees. These are pricier - up to three times the cost of a maiden, but do save time.

What to look for

With maidens, check the main stem is sturdy, straight and has plenty of buds. With all trees, check the graft is firm and well-healed and there are plenty of roots. With a part-trained tree, check that the pruning cuts have been made cleanly, branches are undamaged and the overall shape is balanced.

Training cordons, the most space-saving form



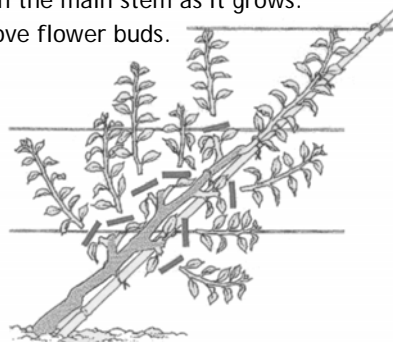
After planting

- Plant one-year-old trees in the dormant season (Nov-Mar) at 45° to the ground. Position them 15-23cm away from the fence or wall, 90cm apart with the graft union 10cm above ground.
- Cut back all side-branches to the third bud from the main stem.
- If the tree has fewer than four side branches, prune back the main stem by a quarter to encourage more side-branches to grow.

- Tie a cane to the supporting wires then tie the tree to the cane.

First summer

- Tie in the main stem as it grows.
- Remove flower buds.



- In late summer, cut back all the new side-shoots to just above the bottom leaf. This encourages fruit buds to form that will crop the following year.
- Cut back any new side-branches growing directly from the main stem to just above the third leaf, provided they are over 20cm long and have brown,

hard, woody bases. This will usually be mid-August for apples or mid- to late July for pears. Leave soft shoots until September, and leave shorter shoots unpruned as they may already be forming fruit buds. Any subsequent new growth should be cut back to one bud some time after leaf fall.

- If the trees are growing against a wall or fence, rub out any shoots growing towards the support.

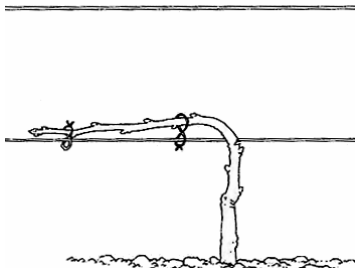
Subsequent winters

- Prune back the main stem to 15-20cm of new growth, until the cordon is the length you want. Then cut all the new growth off, just above a bud.
- Once the cordon is established, the clusters of fruit buds may become overcrowded, producing small fruit. If this happens, thin out the flower buds, removing the oldest first.

Subsequent summers

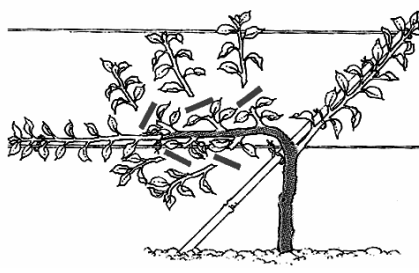
Repeat stages h and i.

Training stepovers for an attractive, productive edging



After planting

- Bend the main stem through 90 degrees if it will go, and tie in.
- Cut a notch just deeper than the bark above a bud on the outside of the bend to encourage a second branch to develop.



- Cut back any side-branches to three buds.
- If the stem is too stiff to bend, cut it back close to the training wire just above a bud.

First summer

- If you were able to bend the main

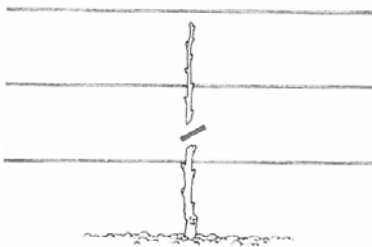
stem for the first branch, anchor a cane at 45° to support the second branch and tie it in.

- When growth stops at the end of the summer, tie this second branch horizontally.
- Prune side-shoots on both branches as for single cordons.
- If both branches are new, anchor two canes to support them at 45° initially, lowering to the horizontal and pruning at the end of the season.

Subsequent years

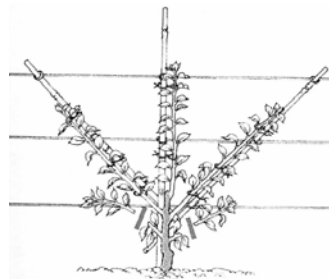
Follow instructions for single cordons.

Training espaliers on walls or fences or as freestanding dividers



After planting

Look for two strong buds near the bottom training wire. These will form the first tier of branches. Cut the main stem just above the next bud up. This will produce the central trunk.

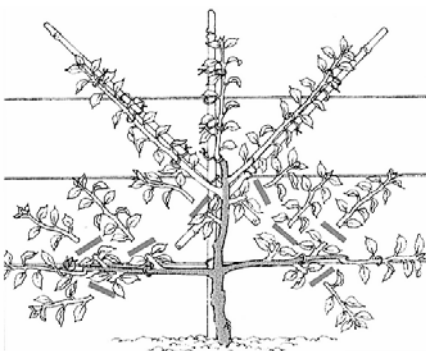


First summer

- Tie in three canes; one vertically, the others on either side at 45°.
- Tie the central branch and two side-branches to the canes.
- Cut back any shoots below the side-branches to two or three leaves.

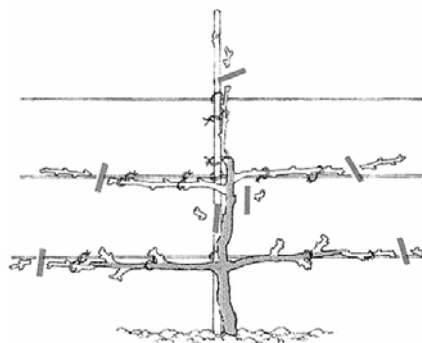
First winter

- Remove any side-branches from the trunk, except the two main ones.
- Remove the canes and lower the two side-branches to horizontal. Prune by a third, to a downward-facing bud. Tie in to the support wires.
- Cut the central branch back to just above a bud where you want the next tier to develop - ideally, close to the next support wire.



Second summer

- Tie in canes at 45 degrees to support the next tier of side-branches, and tie them in.
- Cut back any side-branches between the two tiers to three buds.
- Prune the first tier as for a cordon.



Subsequent winters

- Lower the new tier so that it is horizontal, and prune both tiers as for a cordon. Cut back the central branch to create another tier.
- Once there are enough tiers, cut back the central stem to one bud above the last tier.

Which aspect?

If you have a choice, then use south-facing walls and fences for pears which will benefit most from the extra warmth - the reflected heat can be too hot for apples. West-facing walls are suitable for all fruit. On east-facing walls choose late-flowering varieties to reduce the risk of frost damage to the blossom, and avoid pears altogether in the north. It can be difficult to get ripe fruit on a north wall but it's fine for cooking apples.