

## Hedges, Topiary, Pollarding and Espalier

### Hedges

Hedges have many functions. They do not occur naturally, but when used and trained properly, can be appealing and can effectively blend with existing surroundings. If you shave the sides and give them a “crew-cut” on top, you will have a formal hedge. Permit them to grow more irregularly, and the result will be a more naturalistic screen. A properly maintained hedge requires skill and dedication to keep it in good repair and appearance.

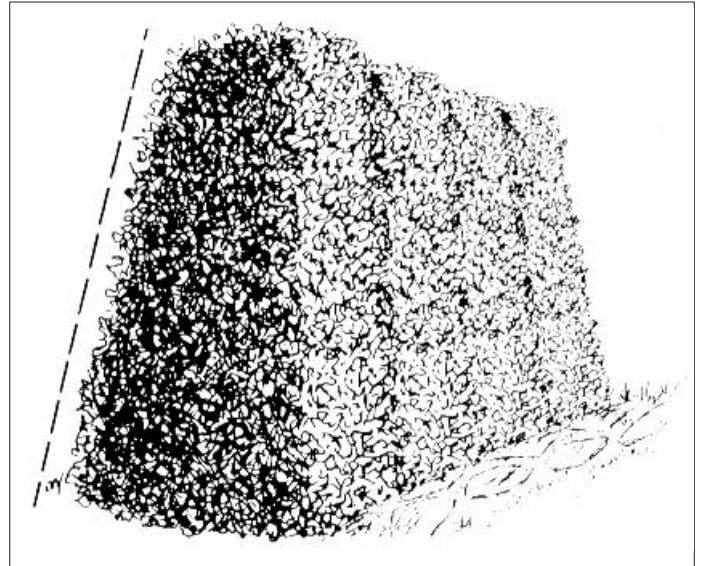
It is imperative to begin intensive **pruning** at the time of planting. If gaps in the bottom of a hedge are to be avoided, pruning must be started early so that the top width is narrower than the bottom. This permits sunlight to reach the lower foliage as well as that near the top. With some evergreen and all deciduous shrubs, cut plants back (both sides and top) by about one-third. This first cut determines the future density of the hedge. In addition to the outward-facing portions (front and back) of each shrub, the right and left sides of every plant should receive an initial first-year trimming. Although this sacrifices one year of initial growth, by trimming all sides to eliminate any loose interlocking branches, each succeeding year's growth will develop uniformly throughout the hedge.

### Glossary

**Espalier:** to train a tree to grow flat against a fence or wall, usually in a regular pattern.

**Pollarding:** the practice of pruning tree branches back to the same uniform points every year.

**Topiary:** shaping a tree or bush into a dense unnatural form, usually an animal or geometric shape.



Generally, hedges are trained in formal, tightly-sheared style. Although more compact and neater than an informal hedge, repeat shearing during the year (2-3 times) is necessary to maintain a neat appearance.

Follow-up pruning of the established hedge depends on the degree of formality and, to some extent, the type of plant used for the hedge. The possibilities are many. (It is unfortunate that only about six different genera of plants get constant use.) Certain types of shrubs and trees make better formal hedges (*Taxus*, California privet, Korean boxwood, hawthorn); others are better adapted to the informal, natural look (arborvitae, hemlock, and certain spireas). The former are sheared, the latter are selectively pruned. Both techniques must be done with care.

The formal hedge generally requires more frequent shearing (1-3 times per year, depending on the plant used). When the hedge is pruned for a formal look, new shoots that persist for any duration will make it appear unkempt. Major shearing is accomplished shortly after the main flush of spring growth has fully elongated in early July. Follow-up shearing is done as necessary. Informal hedges are cut once or twice yearly; a major pruning is done in late winter or early spring, with a follow up in July when necessary. Informal hedges, although set in rows, should be allowed to grow somewhat freely, following their

continued on next page ►

## Hedges, Topiary, Pollarding and Espalier

natural growth habit and yet conforming to some planned regularity of line.

If a formal hedge is being rejuvenated or requires corrective leveling, string a taut line to guide cutting at the desired height. Taking the time to assure equal dimensions throughout the hedge will be rewarded at each successive shearing. To permit the clippings to fall more easily from the top, shear the sides first. Once the proper width has been established, the trimmer will have a far better sense of the desired height to cut. As for any type of pruning, the shears and/or hedge clippers must be properly selected and kept sharp, or the many cut surfaces will look ragged and heal slowly.

### Topiary, Pollarding and Espalier

These three specialized pruning techniques are appropriate for certain plants in some situations. None of them provides a natural appearance to plants. Thus, all require a diligent pruning schedule to maintain the special forms.

#### Topiary

This type of pruning or art form involves the training and shearing of plants to grow in unnatural shapes such as animals, squares, spirals, cylinders, or “poodles.” Occasionally these work effectively in formal settings or park-like areas where they can be featured accents, but are generally not very compatible with existing plants in the residential landscape. The increasingly common “poodled” juniper that is planted in a key location in so many newer suburban landscapes can be quite an eyesore. These forms look totally out of place as specimens and will shortly become trimming nightmares!

If one has a sincere interest in this practice, patience and skill are required to keep topiary shapes maintained. It takes time to achieve good specimens:

4-5 years for simpler shapes, 10-20 years for the elaborate. Initial training requires controlled tying of branches and twigs to a temporary form until they remain in their desired position. Shearing continues during the development process and throughout the life of the plant.

To some it's a fad; to others it's a love. “If you like that sort of foolishness,” as Disraeli once said, “that's the sort of foolishness you like.”

#### Pollarding

This procedure is similar to topping, but is initiated as the tree is developing, and is repeated every year or two. The result is a formal appearance and keeps large growing trees confined. With pollarded trees, a cut is made at the same location each time, and generally at the terminals of primary scaffold branches. After a tree has been pollarded for several years, a knob of branch stubs and bark callus develops at the end of each stem. Fast-growing trees planted in difficult locations are most often used for this practice, for example, London plane, linden, catalpa, and mulberry.



Pollarding is the practice in which each major tree limb is cut back to a pre-set point each year. Here is a row of Norway maples (*Acer platanoides*) that were pruned during the current winter. They exhibit the typical knobby branch clubs at the point where new shoots will appear.

continued on next page ►

## Hedges, Topiary, Pollarding and Espalier

### Espalier

This atypical technique involves the training of certain trees and shrubs so that the branches lie in one plane. Branches are supported on taut wires or a trellis, fence, or pipe that is usually installed against a wall, or may be freestanding.

Recently, espalier plants have regained some popularity. For centuries, fruit trees were the principal plants used for espalier work. The technique requires little space in small garden plats, and blooming and fruit maturity are hastened by heat reflected from walls facing the sun. The current resurgence of espalier is linked to those architectural styles that are enhanced by this plant form. Home with large expanses of windowless walls require some ornamentation.

A carefully chosen espalier can provide an artistic touch through the design and manipulation achieved by the plant's branches. Another possible reason for its increased popularity is the greater diversity of plants that can be effectively and easily espaliered. The choices are no longer limited to fruit trees, but include *Taxus* (yew), *Euonymus alatus*, many of the viburnums and cotoneasters, *Cornus kousa*, *Ilex crenata*, *Chaenomeles speciosa* (flowering quince), *Forsythia*, and *Magnolia*. Flowering, fruiting, fall color, foliage texture, and/or branching structure all enter into the selection process.

The design patterns used for espalier work are usually of two distinctly different types, formal and informal. Whichever is selected, there is an endless array of design arrangements that can be created using one's imagination or by consulting texts on the subject. As one might assume, the formal approach is very precise and structure, requiring a higher degree of maintenance to look tidy. The informal style is not rigid, allowing the branches to grow more as nature might suggest. At the same times, the individual characteristics of the specimen plant are displayed to best advantage.



The espalier technique is a method of training trees and shrubs to a two-dimensional form. The array of plants can be used as an informal espalier is vast. Here is a superb specimen of winged euonymus (*E. alatus*) that provides both beauty and function.

Anyone wishing to grow espaliered plants should be aware that: 1) the process can be time-consuming and require considerable skill, 2) training young plants (which is always advised) can be a slow process, and 3) care must be exercised in placing plants against south-facing walls because of reflected heat. Spacing the horizontal, vertical, and/or diagonal supports about 4-6 inches from the face of the wall or building is generally suggested to allow for good air circulation, branch development, and easier maintenance.

Lastly, be aware of ready-made espaliers that are now popular features in retail nurseries and are used increasingly by designers and architects in their landscape projects. Although these plants are generally of excellent quality and ably satisfy their intended use, they will not maintain themselves and retain their stature without diligent, continued training and pruning.

continued on next page ►

## Hedges, Topiary, Pollarding and Espalier

### Seasonal Pruning Calendar

**WINTER:** after hard freeze; plants truly dormant

- ❖ Thin crowns of mature tree; remove dead or storm damaged limbs
- ❖ Clip hedges to retain clean lines.
- ❖ In late winter rejuvenate shrubs that are out-of-bounds

**EARLY SPRING:** just before bud break

- ❖ Best time to prune roses and summer-flowering shrubs; hydrangea, rose-of-Sharon, glossy abelia, *Buddleia* (butterfly bush), *Cornus* (dogwood species with brightly colored stems), *Hypericum* (St. Johnswort), privet, *Potentilla* (cinquefoil), *Sorbaria* (false spirea), *Spiraea bumalda*, *S. billiardii*, and *Symphoricarpos* (snowberry).
- ❖ Head back growth of random-branched conifer species: junipers, *Chamaecyparis* (false cypress), yews, and *Thuja* (arborvitae).
- ❖ Train young shade trees planted the previous year by selecting scaffold branches, removing others.
- ❖ Preferred time to rejuvenate evergreen and deciduous shrubs and hedges that are out-of-bounds.
- ❖ Best time to annually prune most vines.
- ❖ Alternate time to thin mature trees.
- ❖ Avoid pruning species prone to bleeding (maples, birches, and yellowwood).

**SPRING:** bud break. Best not to prune any woody plants at this time due to translocation of carbohydrates and growth hormones to growing points.

**SPRING/EARLY SUMMER:** leaves fully expanded

- ❖ Rub off trunk buds that will give rise to suckers and water sprouts.
- ❖ Prune spring-flowering shrubs soon after blooming period; azaleas, *Deutzia*, pearl bush, *Forsythia*, *Kerria*, *Kolkwitzia* (beauty bush), ninebark, *Philadelphus* (mock orange), *Rhododendron*, *Spiraea arguta* (bridal-wreath spirea), *S. thunbergii*, *S. vanhouttei*, and *Weigela*.
- ❖ For more compact growth, pinch out one-half of the new growth of pines, spruces, and firs.
- ❖ Clip back the terminals of vigorous new shoots as well as spent flowers in ericaceous species (*Rhododendron*, azaleas, mountain laurel, andromeda); this will keep plants compact and encourage production of side shoots and flower buds.
- ❖ Evergreen shrubs or hedges that were pruned heavily in late winter or early spring can be trimmed now to reestablish clean lines.

continued on next page ►

