
ON GOOD LAND

BY JOAN BERNSTEIN

THE ARCHITECTURAL ORCHARD

An East Moriches family practices the original green design.

EAST MORICHES—Espalier, (*Ess-PAL-yay*), according to Wikipedia, is “the horticultural technique of training trees through pruning and grafting in order to create ‘two-dimensional’ or single-plane patterns by the branches of the tree.” John Leuthardt, the East Moriches orchardist whose grandfather learned the trellising technique in his native Switzerland, explains that the method was established during medieval times, when inhabitants of castles and fortresses needed to produce their food within limited space. (The word comes from the French for shoulder strap, *epaulet*, a nod to the way espalied branches go out from the trunk at shoulder-like right angles.) By training fruit-bearing trees and bushes against walls, gardeners could better control the mass, locating trees for the best exposure to sunlight and warmth, maximizing fruit production. The ground space saved could be devoted to bedding vegetables, which would otherwise be shaded by standard trees.

The technique’s elegance isn’t lost on contemporary users, where fences, trellises, the side of a house or garage serve the same purpose in limited space. “There’s nothing like eating a piece of fruit you’ve just picked fresh from the tree,” Leuthardt says. “You bite into it and the delicious juice runs down your chin. The satisfaction is like growing children, the fruit of your own labor. But you do have to know how.”

Think of espalier as the original green design, a forerunner of today’s rooftop gardens and other edible landscaping. Many homeowners don’t have the sunny, expansive space for one standard fruit tree, let alone the two or three that are required for good cross-pollination and fruit production. (Two such trees take up a lot more space than a child’s sandbox or trampoline.) But with careful pruning, budding and strapping to a sturdy structured frame—and leaning on the Leuthardts’s regular advice to avoid pitfalls—what starts out as a simple “whip” can take on fantastic, but compact, shapes: horizontals, fans, candelabras, Belgian Vs, even gazebos. All fruit-bearing. All eye-catching.

Espalier requires unrelenting attention. It starts with a root stock, onto which is grafted the bud of a specific fruit—apple, pear or “stone” fruit (cherry, plum, peach, apricot, all of which do well in the fertile soil and temperate mid-Atlantic climate). Leuthardt works with a large variety of pears, such as Anjou, Seckel, Comice and Atlantic Queen, which his grandfather propagated and named, plus a multitude of other fruit trees and bushes. He grafts only at the base, never onto the arms of the design, which he believes weakens the tree. It takes four to six years for the simplest design to acquire shape, pruning incessantly, with timing a crucial factor, always maintaining and balancing.

Nursery stock is not allowed to bear while the trees are being shaped. The privilege of enjoying the fruit is reserved for when the trees are

secure in their future habitats. During the lengthy growth period before they are sold, Leuthardt finds huge satisfaction in watching each tree evolve into “something desirable, something satisfying. You’re working with the environment, producing oxygen, making food, creating a positive energy. That gets you through the bad times when Mother Nature throws a curve ball at you. It’s worth the risk. It’s not all about making money. It’s about the earth.”

It’s also about heritage. Henry P. Leuthardt and his father, Henry Leuthardt, established their first nurseries in Westchester County before deciding to move to the more clement growing environment of Long Island in the 1950s. (A late frost—only too common “upstate”—can literally nip trees in the bud.) On 26 acres they purchased in East Moriches they focused on dwarf fruit trees, a more “fruitful” approach given their limited acreage. Young John learned the rigorous process of propagating, budding and training dwarf fruit trees, and eventually the methods of espaliering shapes to both marvel onlookers and bear well by following his father and older brothers around the farm. As a teenager, he had already established a lawn- and yard-care business on his own, but when his older brothers decided to pursue their own interests and his father retired in 1997, John stepped in to run the nursery business. His mother, Pat, handled the office, and Henry Sr. accepted the role of consultant. In other words, Leuthardt’s customers, many of whom order trees from the company Web site, benefit from three generations of know-how.

Six years ago the curator from the Cloisters in New York, guided by an original bill of sale, called the nursery. One of their ancient espaliered trees had died and she was looking for a replacement. The novelty of getting a tree from the grandson of the original grower inspired her to plan an elaborate dedication ceremony. Unfortunately, John couldn’t get away: it was the height of the busy season.

Digging and delivering or shipping the trees takes place in spring and fall, predominantly from September to December while the trees are dormant, though the lengthening growing season has made this optimum timing less certain. Espaliered trees are packed in burlap, blanketed and cushioned with newspaper, then crated like giant oil paintings, and handled just as carefully. They arrive at their destinations with precise planting instructions and Leuthardt’s reassuring “Call if you need help. That’s why we’re here.” □

Visit Henry Leuthardt Nurseries on Montauk Highway in East Moriches; 878-1357, www.henryleuthardtnurseries.com. Open Monday–Saturday, 9 a.m.–noon, 1–4 p.m., Sunday, 10 a.m.–noon, 1–3 p.m. for pickup only. September 1–December 20, March 15–May 30. Closed Easter Sunday and Thanksgiving Day.