



Ancient pruning art sees renewed popularity

By LORI HALL STEELE

Special to the Record-Eagle

Sixteen whimsical apple trees, flattened on a trellis, form an entwined fence along the eastern border of Tom and Darylene Shea's Central Neighborhood backyard.

"It's a fantasy," Darylene said of her apple tree fence.

Espalier — the ancient botanical art of pruning trees, shrubs and vines into fanciful flat shapes — is finding its way into more and more northern Michigan yards, like the Shea's. The fanciful forms can transform a yard into a magical, graceful or quirky landscape.

Designs range from free-form single trees against a wall to enmeshed free-standing fences to geometric patterns. Some espaliers are trained in the shape of candelabras, rows of candlesticks or hearts. And it's not as difficult as it appears to become a botanical architect.

Darylene Shea first saw espaliered trees in Seattle in the 1970s, and the couple later

saw the technique used on shrubs in Williamsburg, Va.

"Tom said he'd like to be able to live off the yard, and we saw this in Seattle and liked it," Darylene Shea said. "It works in this yard."

The 16 trees were planted in 1977 and took three or four years to establish in the Belgian fence pattern, a geometric grid of diamond-shaped branches. The trees grow in a 40-by-3-foot bed lined with yellow bricks. The Sheas prune the trees twice a summer. It takes about four hours each time.

"As you can see, some branches are obedient, but every once in a while they make up their mind to go their own way," Tom Shea said.

The Sheas planted Granny Smith apples, which they spray with organic pesticides annually. Dwarf apples and pears are the most common trees used in espalier treatments, but cherry trees, grapes, roses and ornamentals, like crab apples and forsythia, also are used.

"If you've got a gardener who's tried everything, it's kind of a neat challenge. It's just



Record-Eagle/Jim Bovin

Above and right, Tom and Darylene Shea's yard is bordered by apple trees that have been espaliered, a type of pruning that creates a flat, stylized look.

really cool looking," said master gardener Linda McCoy, who works in sales at Pine Hill Village Gardens in Traverse City. "A lot of times people will do it because you have a small area and still want a fruit tree."

Using espalier techniques, homeowners can grow fruit in areas as small as 8 feet by 14 inches. Pine Hill's landscapers also have used the technique to dress up trouble spots like the narrow ground between sidewalks and garages or cinderblock walls.

"You can get that wrap-around effect of a full garden,



with latticework up and green all over, even against a wall," McCoy said. "You don't have to be a professional to do it. And people are amazed at how cool it looks. It does take a little practice for a beginner, and grapevines and rosebushes are

a little easier to manage off the bat."

Books or Web sites can guide novices to proper pruning techniques for specific trees, vines and shrubs. Some fruit trees can be planted solo, while others need companions for the cross-pollination required to bear fruit.

Some trees aren't well suited to being trained and flattened. Certain apple trees, for instance, bear fruit at the branch tips, which will disrupt training, said Gary Thornton, district fruit specialist for MSU Extension in Leelanau County.

Different fruit trees also respond differently to pruning, setting shoots in different directions, so it's important to do some homework.

Thornton doesn't recommend planting pears in city backyards because they tend to be susceptible to pear psylla, an aphid-like pest that feeds on sap and excretes a honeydew around its body. That honeydew can be invaded by a sooty mold that turns pears black and can stunt the tree.

Apple trees also are susceptible to pests — three in particular, including the classic worm in the apple — and may need to

WOW! Patio Furniture Galore! MICHIGAN'S LARGEST DISPLAY OF CASUAL PATIO FURNITURE AND BARBEQUE GRILLS

HOMECREST



RATTAN-WICKER

DUCANE GRILLS



Great Selection
Lowest Prices
Guaranteed

Homecrest • Telescope • Brown Jordan • Woodard
Land Indoor/Outdoor Wicker and Rattan • O.W. Lee • Grosfillex
Mattresses • Ducane and Tec Infra-Red Grills and Much More

Summer Place Casuals

14000 US-31 South (15 minutes west of Chums Corner)
1-231-325-6000 • 1-877-322-8820

Sat. 10-4 p.m. • Sun. 12-3 p.m.

Mon., Tues., Thurs., Fri. 10-6 p.m. • Closed Wednesdays

4/26.647728.0D

Ward Brother's Charter Boats, Inc.

- Fishing Charters
- Engine Repair, maintenance and parts
- Hauling & Launching
- Bottom washing and painting • Gas & diesel fuel

106 East Antrim • Charlevoix, MI 49720

1-800-551-2556
(231) 547-2371 • FAX (231) 547-6803

4/26.647752.0D