



Framing Nature

Photos courtesy of Amis du Potager du Roi & Dominique Stillace / Pommeraie Idéale
Text by Victor Santoni

Espalier gardening has ancient roots that have stood the test of time. Incorporating this art into any landscape creates a living design that, with loving care, lasts for decades.

Ask a garden lover where to find the best examples of French espalier trees, and they may likely say: “le Potager du Roi.”

In place since 1683, the Potager on the grounds of the Château de Versailles is indeed one of the finest places in the world to see the wondrous results of espalier gardening.

Passionate about this art of training fruit trees, Michel Schlosser founded the *Amis du Potager du Roi* (Friends of the King’s Fruit and Kitchen Garden) in 2016 — an association that exists to spread the word of the famous vegetable patch while championing French heritage, both at home and overseas.

A former University professor of finance and strategy, Michael has a natural talent for sharing knowledge. When he first learned about the history of espalier, he understood its survival rested on nurturing and transmitting this ancient savoir-faire and was quick to take action.

Along with a growing group of people and organizations, the *Amis* are campaigning to have espalier recognized as a part of UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage



BUILT TO LAST

1. An illustration showing Roger Schabol's gardening theory, which depicts peach trees trellised with rags.
- 2 & 3. Examples found at Dominique Stillace's La Pommeraie Idéale — a landscape park dedicated to upholding the art of espalier.
4. Workers tending the earth at the Potager du Roi in Versailles.



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— an act that would further boost the practice's popularity and, more importantly, safeguard it for future generations.

Growing “in espalier” involves the diligent training and pruning of branches to shape a tree, shrub or vine using a specific rootstock to optimize the plant's growth. This technique allows for maximal sun exposure and control over when, where and how many fruits will grow.

France has practiced espalier since the Middle Ages, when much of the country's produce was cultivated in orchards and gardens filled with espalier-formed plants.

The art's true popularity soared with a revolutionary invention at the beginning of the 19th century: secateurs (Editor's note: pruning shears). This handy tool — plus the wider availability of metal fasteners — made pruning and training far easier than before. Suddenly, espalier was being practiced by countless gardeners, both professional and amateur, and the *jardins* of France became as structured as its orchards.



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CULTIVATING HERITAGE

Several associations and individuals across France work hard to ensure the continued legacy of espalier gardening.

Unfortunately, the wars of the 20th century forced Europe to prioritize large-scale industrialized methods of food production. As a result, the culture of espalier, as well as numerous other skilled labor techniques, were sadly lost in time.

Today, however, espalier is enjoying a deserved revival thanks to several trends that are making it relevant to our current world. From rooftops to community gardens, the general desire to “eat local” has led to the cultivation of more fruits and vegetables in towns. There is also an overall demand for greener cities, which fits the nature of espalier; it lends itself to growing in unusual and smaller spaces, such as vegetal walls or façades covered in climbing plants. Not only does this type of vegetation make a concrete wall more appealing, it also improves air quality by soaking up carbon.

Moreover, creating a structured garden, especially in an urban area, is a social endeavor. Such an undertaking — labor-intensive and requiring skills, knowledge and dedication — often includes entire neighborhoods, bonding communities over a shared project.

Though espalier is practiced worldwide, its cultural legacy is particularly strong in France, where it is considered a national specialty and is present in many of the country's most famous gardens. In resuscitating this ancient art, both in sprawling landscapes and smaller spaces, gardeners take pride in feeling that they are continuing the writing — or rather, the sculpting — of botanical history. 🍷

www.amisdupotagerduroi.org



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