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**PLEACHED OR ESPALIÉRED TREES** have featured in our gardens for hundreds of years. Especially since Victorian times, gardeners have played with, coaxed and contoured trees to particular shapes and forms for aesthetic or practical reasons. Having a row of pleached trees in your garden became something of a status symbol and when used in a grand scale, the maintenance of them would require numerous gardeners.

Over the past few years pleached trees have seen a surge in popularity once again. No longer do we typically only use them to pleach off an area or neighbour that we don't want to see; now designers are including them as a feature in their own right once more. As a result, there has been a huge demand for ready-shaped trees, especially *Carpinus betulus* (Hornbeam) and to a lesser extent *Tilia* (Lime).

The first thing to realise, if you are thinking of including pleached trees in a design, is the annual care they require, to retain their shape. An avenue or row of regular specimen trees needs little on-going maintenance, but a high-quality pleached feature will need pruning, tying in and maintenance at least twice during a single growing season. Anything less and you will not have the quality and detail you expect to see, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to reverse neglect. You can easily spend a whole day pruning and tying in a row of 10 *Tilia* pleach twice a year, so don't make it part of your design unless you can be sure of this level of maintenance.

Pleach comes in numerous forms, shapes and sizes. If you are starting from scratch, trees can be pleached from the ground up or at any trunk height, as well as to any size or shape you want. However, if you want a pleach that's ready now, you are governed by what is commercially grown, what is available of the quality and maturity you require, and by what you can afford.

It's possible to put in an order for a pleach and what you receive is a tree that will be selected and lifted, trained and caned all in one day. It may only have five tiers when, for *Carpinus* for example, it should have



Left: A pleached *Tilia* (Lime) walk. Above: *Carpinus betulus* (Hornbeam) on stilts



Well-grown specimens and regular maintenance are key to using these shaped trees in designs

# PLEACHING

**“A high-quality pleached feature will need pruning, tying-in and maintenance at least twice during a single growing season”**

## BEST PRACTICE

A typical pleach may look like this but the dimensions can vary dramatically as indicated in the brackets. Shape can also vary

seven, and will take years to fill out the wider gaps. I have also seen too many pleached trees that have just been clear stemmed, and may have many very ugly scars on their trunks from the branches being removed, and often have a rather crooked trunk. Obviously there is little labour involved in this kind of pleach: what you get is a very immature and usually poor quality pleach, sparsely fanned out over a bamboo cane frame.

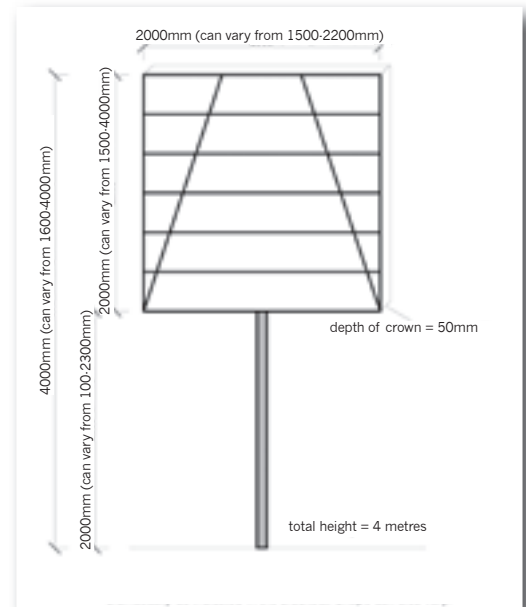
Top-quality pleaching takes time – sometimes four years or more of labour-intensive shaping – and skill. It requires excellent stock selection, strong and square framework, perfect planting spacing, and the work of an outstanding nurseryman. This is why an expertly pleached tree is expensive (this year, expect to pay about £700-£900 for a semi-mature *Carpinus* on a 2m trunk, with a 2m x 2m head, and a couple of hundred pounds less for *Tilia*).

There are really only a handful of excellent quality pleached growers in Europe. One in particular is a total perfectionist who refuses to sell a pleached tree unless it is as close to perfect as nature allows – and then only to wholesale nurseries he likes. This grower and the other best pleach nurseries select young trees (three to five years old) that have the correct branch spacing and orientation. They then line them out in perfect avenues so that a good nurseryman can see any variation and prune and tie-in all the branches to fill out the lateral frame, working at perfect 90-degree angles to the trunk on a perfectly level field. The older a tree, the harder it becomes to grow that perfect pleach – the branches will end up at 45 degrees and growing in every direction.

Typically fast-growing trees, such as *Tilia* and *Carpinus* are the most readily available. Other types of tree – such as *Fagus* (Beech), *Platanus* (London Plane), *Pyrus calleryana* ‘Chanticleer’ (Ornamental pear), *Malus* (Crab Apples), fruit trees – also make effective pleaches, but they can take longer to train and, as they are only grown on a few nurseries, availability is limited. I have seen pleached *Aesculus hippocastanum* (Chestnut) and while very fast growing trees such as these can be used, it will take a very disciplined staff of gardeners with extra time on their hands to ensure the structure of the pleach survives. Last autumn I saw some lovely pleached trees that looked outstanding from a distance, but once I got close to them I couldn’t believe my eyes: they were *Cupressus leylandii* (Leyland Cypress). However, I was so impressed that I bought a lot to grow on, which hopefully I won’t regret.

One great benefit of pleaching is that while it takes work, you can maintain what would otherwise be large trees to a specific size and shape. The trunk will get bigger and the branches will get thicker, but as long as you regularly prune back long shoots, tie them in, rub out buds in the wrong places, water and feed as required, you can control the size fairly easily.

The framework for the pleach at the time of planting should be given serious consideration. A structure of bamboo canes may do the trick while growing on the



nursery, but in years to come it will rot and decay and may cause the whole pleached feature to look poor. Sometimes building a permanent structure from wood or metal is well worth it. Always make sure that the spacing of your lateral supports is the same as the original tree and that it is square and level all the way through. Tensioned cable can also look good, especially in a contemporary setting.

It is also critical to ensure that the newly planted tree has no restrictive ties because as the branches grow and swell the ties can close out the cambium, stopping growth and eventually causing die back. On each twice-yearly maintenance you will need to remove any restrictive ties and put in new, looser ones.

A final word of advice: due to their popularity and limited supply – last year there was a shortage of *Carpinus* in particular – you should secure your pleach when you design them into the job, so as to avoid being forced to change your design or accept an inferior tree, that was pleached yesterday. If you start with poor-quality pleach, the client will never enjoy a lovely mature pleached feature. 🚫

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Pleached *Tilia* at Arley Hall, Cheshire

### Suitable for pleaching

#### Deciduous

***Carpinus betulus* (Hornbeam)**

***Tilia* (Lime)**

***Fagus* (Beech)\***

***Platanus* (London Plane)\***

***Pyrus calleryana* ‘Chanticleer’ (Ornamental Pear)**

***Malus* (Crab Apples)\***

#### Fruit trees

***Aesculus hipp.* (Chestnut)\***

***Cornus mas***

***Liquidamber styraciflua*\***

***Acer campestre* ‘Elsrijk’**

***Quercus palustris*\***

#### Evergreen

***Cupressus leylandii***

***Photinia x fraseri* ‘Red Robin’**

***Quercus ilex* (Evergreen Oak)\***

Those marked\* will be in more limited supply

*Carpinus* pleach. Design by Justin Greer

