Late winter and early spring are the best times
to prune plants. Fruit trees, ornamental shrubs,
shade trees and many other plants recover quick-
ly and are less subject to injury if pruned at this
time of year. However, to prove that plants are
able to endure very extreme types of pruning, let
us consider some of the most unusual forms.

Over thousands of years living with plants, some
bizarre pruning practices have evolved. Perhaps
the two most extreme forms that are still used to-
day are topiary and espalier (pronounced ess-
PAL-yer. Both these pruning techniques ap-
parently originated in ancient Rome, and have sur-
vived with varying degrees of popularity since that
time.

Topiary, the art of forming plants into the shapes
of animals, people or geometric figures is seldom
seen in home landscapes, and only occasionally in
public gardens. It made use of evergreen plants
such as boxwood and yew to form into animals
such as deer, bear, giraffe or geometric figures in-
cluding cones, cubes, spheres or combination of
them. It requires a large amount of hand labor and
time to develop and maintain plants in these un-
natural shapes. Topiary reached its peak of
popularity in the middle 1600’s, but the gradual
shift to more naturalistic landscapes and more ex-
pensive labor led to its decline.

Espalier, which is still frequently practiced, is a
technique of pruning that forces a plant to grow in
a flat plane, usually against a wall or trellis. Since
this practice goes back to ancient Rome, the word
itself is based on an Italian word meaning a
shoulder strap. This is because the basic design
often suggested a shoulder-like appearance as
the branches came from the trunk at right angles
and then turned abruptly upright in a candelabra-
like shape.

The word we use today is actually a French
word which means fruit wall. Espalier reached its
peak popularity in France. Colonial Americans also
practiced espalier, and George Washington used

Espalier may become more popular with home
gardeners once again. Many homes have limited
space, and dwarf fruit trees may be espaliered
with much less pruning than standard trees.
These fruit trees can be both ornamental and pro-
ductive on a blank wall. An espalier may even help
save energy by shading a hot, sunny wall in sum-
mer or reduce heat loss by cutting down rapid air
movement across a house wall on a windy winter
day. Those who would like to espalier flowering
plants might consider pyrancahna, spirea, flower-
ing quince, forsythia, magnolia, or evergreens
such as yew.

To make an espalier, branches do not have to
be pulled tightly against a wall, but may be allowed
to remain about 6 inches from it. This will create
dead air space as well as provide more suitable
temperatures for plant growth. Fasteners or nails
placed into the wall are often used to develop the
design. Espalier may also be done against a trellis
or fence. Tying and shaping against a trellis or
fence is easier than shaping with pegs inserted in-
to a wall. Do not tie branches with wire, but use
soft string. Wire may bind the branch as it
becomes thicker. Even cloth ties should be ex-
amined occasionally to prevent girdling of bran-
ches. As the form develops, branches will
become rigid and need less ties.

Before beginning, draw the geometric design
you want to create on a piece of paper and take it
with you whenever you pinch or prune the plant.
Start with small young plants that are flexible, and
do not deviate from the planned design. If a
branch becomes too woody to be bent properly,
cut it back severely to force out young shoots that
can be curved properly.

Severe cuts should be made while plants are
dormant. Very frequent clipping out of small twigs
may be done anytime during the season as need-
ed. Avoid late summer pruning when late growth
might develop that is easily killed by severe winter
weather.