

## Mastering the art of French pruning

Mary Keen enjoys a lesson in 'la taille de transparence', an elegantly naturalistic method of shaping trees, which was developed by a formidable European princess.



Take a bough: John Massey demonstrates before Mary climbs the ladder to put his guidance into practice on her *Ptelea trifoliata*

By Mary Keen

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If you go to Ashwood Nurseries and get the chance to see John Massey's private garden, look out for the most beautiful specimen of the weeping silver pear that I know. *Pyrus salicifolia* 'Pendula' was the tree everyone wanted to grow in the Sixties. It always looked like a mad upside-down silver beehive to me – like a tangle of grey hair that has never seen a comb – but in the Massey garden, every strand is separate. It must take hours to groom. No branch and barely a twig is allowed to cross, so that the tree is beautiful, balanced and airy, with a slim trunk clearly visible behind the silver tresses.

I always sigh with envy at the high-level horticulture in the Massey garden, and John always responds that he learnt everything he knows from the formidable late Princess Greta Sturdza, whose Normandy garden, Le Vasterival, was a place of pilgrimage for serious gardeners. Perhaps because I was aware

that such techniques were beyond my scope, I never made it.

The silver pear is the most spectacular example of the Sturdza pruning technique, but plenty of other trees are treated in the same way. John says that turning trees into airy bouquets means that you can grow far more plants beneath them, because reducing the branches lets in so much light. As I was leaving after my last visit, he showed me the French book that has just come out explaining the method; better still, he offered to come and teach me how to do it in my own garden. *La taille* is what French women are best at (the word means waistline as well as pruning), and the same is true of French gardeners – although the French have always been known for torturing trees. Think of all those immaculate rectangles where old men play boules under rows of tailored planes.

When I got home I ordered *La taille de transparence*. The author, Dominique Cousin, comes from a Normandy fruit-growing family, but when the princess spotted his talent he became her personal *tailleur* (pruner) and together they refined the method on all the trees and shrubs at Le Vasterival. The pictures are clear, even if your French is a bit rusty.

The principle of transparency is that in nature old trees, such as oaks, die back from the crown so that dead branches drop, allowing more light and rain to reach the roots. Pruning ornamental trees is not only a cosmetic exercise, it also invigorates growth. It is particularly useful in gardens like mine, where trees planted 20 years ago have become too dominant, and where trees or shrubs block what lies behind because they are too dense. And of course it allows you to grow many more things under the dappled canopy.

The lesson of the book is that you must tackle the pruning slowly, reducing the lateral growth so that you open up the centre. You start as you might with any plant, by taking out all dead and crossing wood and removing all spindly side growth; then you stop and look to see what else should go.

Having private tuition from John was a quick way to gain confidence, but I think I could have grasped the principles from the book. There are 25 case studies – including a magnolia, which I have always been fearful of touching – and the author stresses that none should be considered an absolute example and that every tree or shrub should keep its natural shape. The timing of the operation, the book says, is from August until May. I suspect it is much easier to tackle without leaves to muddle the picture.

For the private practical, John chose a large *Ptelea trifoliata* at the back of the summer garden here in Gloucestershire. This was something I thought I had pruned last year, as I knew it was too dominant, but with John to guide me I saw that I had been far too cautious. When we had finished there was a huge pile of branches on the lawn. At the start, John stood on the ground directing operations, and it

may always be a help to have two people to do this job, as it is quite hard to see what needs to be removed while on the ladder. Twiggy side growths were the first to go, then any small crossing growths. This was done with secateurs, and John made me cut as close to the branch as possible – much closer than I thought was right, as he said wounds heal faster that way. (We rubbed some soil on the cuts at the end.)

When it came to the slightly bigger branches – those about 4in in diameter – we upgraded the tool to a little pruning saw. John taught me to cut the branch higher than the final cut so that there was no danger of the weight of the branch ripping the bark. At one moment, pulling out the cut branch threatened to make me topple, even on the safe tripod ladder. A cry for help got John on the rung behind to help manhandle it down. We thought readers would enjoy an action shot, but the photographer declined to take it on health-and-safety grounds. At the end John cut off a few even larger branches with a bow saw.

When we stood back to admire our work I could not believe how good it looked. So good that it really showed up the lanky *Prunus x subhirtella* behind with a wonky leader. The large lime over the churchyard wall fell on it years ago, and I never had the heart to remove it. But I have now; the cherry went the same week, and the sculptural *Ptelea* looks terrific against a background of the neighbour's evergreens.

I want to rejuvenate many other plants now, especially the lopsided *Crataegus persimilis* 'Prunifolia' in the dell and the *Heptacodium* in the summer garden that everyone assured me would never get too big. When those are done, I may even tackle a magnolia.

## **Basic principles**

Stand back and look at the natural shape of the tree

Use sharp, clean tools

Aim for an open centre – think of a vase

Remove dead wood and crossing branches

Take out spindly side shoots

Cut lateral shoots where they interfere with the chosen shape and as high up the leaders as you can

Prune close to the main branch or trunk so that wounds heal

Cut heavy branches a couple of feet above the final cut

Stand back and admire your work

Add more plants under the rejuvenated tree

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