

M. Richards



*f* ILOLI

GARDENER'S REFERENCE

*“Are those trees naturally shaped like that?” visitors sometimes wonder aloud. In winter and early spring, Filoli’s entry drive, bowling green and high place are lined with the naked, knobby, sculptural forms of pollarded London plane trees (*Platanus x hispanica*). This type of pruning is a fairly common practice in formal European gardens and boulevards, but is less common in the United States. In addition to its formal, sculptural appeal, pollarding is useful to maintain trees at a desired size, but requires annual attention to keep from losing the tree’s form, and upkeep can be expensive for homeowners.*

### History and Style

There is evidence from the writing of Pliny the Younger that pollarded trees date back to the vineyards of ancient Roman villas, and they appear to have a long history in Asia as well. Some trace the modern popularity of pollarding to Medieval Europe, where feudal lords owned the main trunk, or bole, of all of a manor’s trees. Peasants were allowed to harvest foliage and young growth from the canopy, which they then used for animal fodder, firewood, tanning leather, or small building and weaving materials. Over time, these harvests transformed manor trees as the branch collars of each year’s cuts healed over into thick, warty fists, or ‘bolls’.

Today, pollarding serves a dual purpose of aesthetic style and practical care. Pollarding maintains a tree’s size and shape, while encouraging dense, vigorous growth. This size control makes pollards a good solution for restricted areas like streets and allées where large trees could interfere with electrical wires or buildings. With annual attention, trees can be maintained at a specified height for centuries.

The resulting uniformity is especially effective at Filoli, where repetition plays an important role in the landscape’s formal design. From October to late April, when the trees’ bolls are clear of new growth, the plane trees add an important sculptural element to the landscape. Also, new growth on *Platanus* species is susceptible to infection by various fungi, including powdery mildew and a group of diseases called Anthracnose. By removing any infected tissue, pollarding prevents these fungi from over wintering and spreading through the trees.

**Coppicing** has a similar history to pollarding; originally used in European woodlands to provide sources of firewood and small building materials. Coppicing differs from pollarding in that trees and shrubs are cut to the ground, and their ‘stools’ are allowed to regenerate for 7-20 years before being cut again. Pollarding was often preferred to coppicing, because regenerating shoots were safe from grazing stock and wildlife.

POLLARDING

DEC	POLLARD
NOV	
OCT	
SEP	
AUG	NEW GROWTH
JUL	
JUN	
MAY	
APR	DORMANT
MAR	
FEB	
JAN	

## Establishing and Maintaining Pollarded Trees

Come fall, visitors may find Filoli's garden staff on orchard ladders or half hidden in the plane trees' leafy growth, using sharp pruners and hand saws to cut the year's sprouts flush back to their branch collars, and rubbing the bolls free of debris. Many gardeners choose to wear dust masks and goggles for this task to protect eyes and lungs from the irritating hairs that slough off the backs of trees' leaves in dusty clouds.

The trees at Filoli are secondary pollards, meaning that secondary shoots are removed each year, back to a scaffold of primary branches. When the young plane trees at Filoli reached about eight feet tall, they were headed back to a uniform height. If a desired height is not specified, it is determined by the height of available ladders; the bolls of most of Filoli's trees must be reached from 10 and 12 foot ladders, or from within the trees themselves. From the next year's sprouts at their initial heading cuts, five to eight radially arranged scaffold branches were selected and headed back to three to five feet. Over years, sprouts were continually removed back to that

Director of Horticulture Lucy Tolmach hypothesizes that the metal pole connecting the pollarded plane trees along the bowling green was originally intended as a guide to pleach the trees. **Pleaching** is a practice of weaving together the branches of closely-planted trees or shrubs, creating a two dimensional wall or screen; here, this would effectively raise the height of the wall, bringing it into scale with the bowling green and main residence.

point, in an annual process that has lasted for 88 years on the oldest trees.

Note that pollards are started as young trees; when mature trees are cut back hard, it is called topping. Topping triggers a very different growth response, does not create a pollarded appearance, and can be damaging or fatal to the tree.

### References & Further Reading:

- Lurie, D. (1999). The Practice of Pollarding. *The Sundial Times*, 23, 3-4.
- Svihra, P. (2003). *Anthracnose*. (Publication no. 7420). University of California division of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Retrieved 23 May, 2007 from: <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7420.html>



*Newly established plane trees at the High Place, before pollarding has begun. 1921*

*Filoli Gardener's Reference sheets are created by garden staff to answer common questions regarding Filoli's traditional horticultural practices. This sheet may be accessed from the Filoli website.*

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