Ken Muir's Guide to Growing Kiwi

The Kiwi Fruit *(Actinidia deliciosa)* and the closely related Hardy Kiwi Fruit *(Actinidia arguta)* are very hardy twining climbers and can be cropped outdoors wherever grapes grow. The bush requires very good shelter from prevailing winds, otherwise tender young shoots will be broken off and damage at any time to the leaves will reduce the yield. Bushes are excellent for covering old walls and should be planted at least 5.5m (18ft) apart.

The Kiwi Fruit *(Actinidia deliciosa)* is the kiwi that you see in the grocery store. The fruits are approximately the size of a hen's egg with a hairy, brown, skin finish. The lesser known Hardy Kiwi Fruit *(Actinidia arguta)* produces fruits that look quite different from the Kiwi fruit. They are considerable smaller (approximately 1 inch long), They are borne in clusters and have smooth edible skins so they can be eaten just like grapes. They have a much sweeter and more aromatic flavour than the Kiwi Fruit. As implied by the name, this plant can tolerate extremely cold conditions and are hardy to approximately -25ºF (-30ºC).

CLIMATIC CONDITIONS & ASPECT

Kiwi fruits are most likely to succeed south of a line drawn from the Wash to Shrewsbury, provided they are grown against a south facing wall. Ideally the site should have a southerly or south-westerly aspect with maximum shelter from the prevailing winds and away from low lying ground which can attract spring frosts.

SOIL CONDITIONS

The vines of kiwi fruits grow best on deep fertile soils which will retain moisture. The soil should be slightly acid (pH 6.5) and the manure requirements of the bushes are similar to those of blackberries.

PLANTING DISTANCES

The kiwi fruit is a very vigorous climber and should be planted at least 5.4m (18ft) apart. Under garden conditions where space is limited, one male and one female plant can be planted in the same hole, and their vines trained along the supporting framework in opposite directions.

ESPALIER SPUR PRUNING SYSTEM

Kiwi fruit can be grown on a similar type of support as required by blackberries, excepting the wires should be 45cm (18in) apart. Vines trained in this way have to be spur pruned. A 2.1m (7ft) long bamboo cane should be pushed into the soil next to the vine and tied to the wires. The vine should be cut back at the height of the lowest wire. The three strongest shoots that grow should be selected and any others pinched out. The upper one, as it grows, should be trained and tied to the bamboo cane but should not be allowed to twist itself round the cane or its growth could be restricted. The remaining shoots should be

trained in opposite directions along the wire. The procedure should be repeated as the centre vine reaches each wire.

The laterals should have their growing points pinched out when they have grown 90cm (3ft) long. This encourages the production of side shoots and these should be pinched back to five leaves to form fruiting spurs; subsequent sub-laterals should be removed as they appear. This procedure encourages the formation of fruit buds. When spurs bear fruit, vegetative shoots should be regularly pinched back to seven leaves. During winter, fruiting spurs should be cut back to two buds beyond where the fruit was borne in the preceding season.

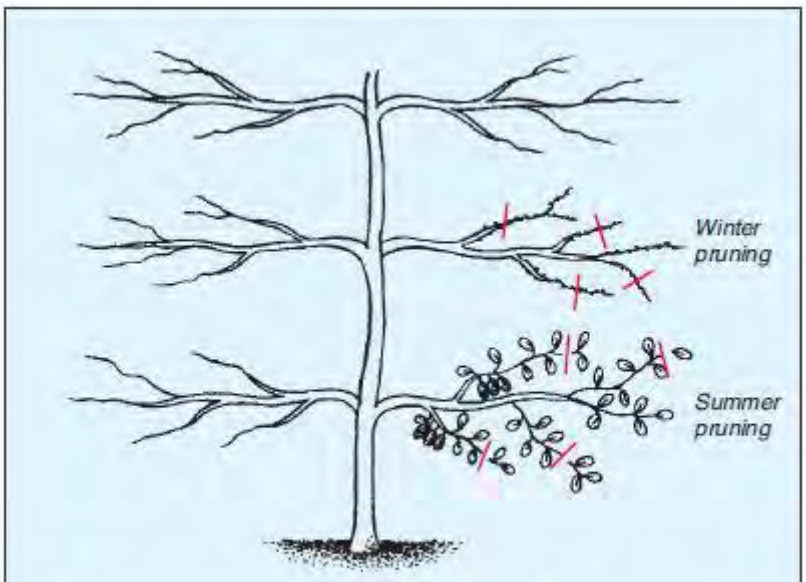

FIG. 72: Espalier spur pruning system for growing kiwi fruit

WINTER PRUNING

Winter pruning should be left until the end of the winter so that any shoots that have been killed by frost can be removed. Any fruit spurs should be pruned back to two buds beyond where the last fruits were borne. The arms that bore fruit in the previous year should be cut back to their replacement shoots. Approximately three fruiting laterals with plump, closely spaced buds should remain on each fruiting arm to bear fruit. Those in excess of this number and have flat widely-spaced buds, should be cut out. Bleeding from the wounds might occur but this is harmless and will soon cease.

MANURING

In April, May and June following planting, each plant should have broadcast in a 1m (3ft) diameter circle around its base:

10g (1⁄4oz) Nitro-Chalk (calcium ammonium nitrate).

In the years following, in March, broadcast either side of the row a compound fertilizer following the manufacturer's recommendations.

PROTECTION FROM SPRING FROSTS

The flowers and young growth can be severely damaged by spring frosts; it is therefore advisable to protect the young growth and flowers during this period by covering with fleece or heavy gauge polythene but keeping the ends open. This may also help to give protection from the prevailing winds which can damage the tender growth.

POLLINATION

In order to obtain a good set of fruit, the female flowers should be hand pollinated by gently brushing the anthers of the male flowers in a circular motion over the stigmas of the female flowers. There is sufficient pollen on one male flower to fertilize eight female flowers. The pollination should be done no more than three times — when one third, one half and all the flowers are open.

HARVESTING & STORAGE

The fruit is ready for picking when a slight depression can be made in the surface of the fruit if pressed hard with the thumb. The largest fruits should be gathered first, allowing the smaller ones to swell a bit more. All the fruit should be harvested as soon as there is a risk of night frost occurring. Stored in a cool place, the fruit will keep for up to three months.

YIELDS

It will take up to five years for the vines of the kiwi fruit to bear any appreciable amount of fruit; under glass the time taken is much less. It takes eight to nine years to achieve full production outdoors and at this stage yields of 13.5kg (30lb) or more of fruit can be expected.

PESTS, DISEASES & DISORDERS

In the U.K, kiwi plants are largely trouble free and can be grown organically very successfully.