

HOUSEPLANTS DEPARTMENT



TOPIARY

By Dee Beckman

Topiary is the art of creating sculptures using a medium of living trees and shrubs by pruning and clipping. Not to be confused with Bonsai, that is an art creating nature in a miniature form. There is no limit to what you can do. The word derives from the Latin meaning “creator of places”.



First introduced by Caesar in Tuscany, who grew interesting shapes like ciphers, obelisks and animal shapes that brought what was a plain garden to life, and produced a miniature landscape (*topos*). The trees and shrubs that are used in topiary are usually evergreen and have naturally small leave or needles, creating dense foliage and have compact and/or columnar growth habit. Vines (Hedera and creeping Fig) are sometime used over a shaped

wire frame or cage to create a specific shape.

The most common plants used without a frame but are not limited to are:

- Boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*),
- Laurels (*Laurus nobilis* and *Ficus benjimina*),
- Holly (*Ilex* spp),
- Myrtles (*Eugenia* and *Myrtus* spp.),
- Yews (*Taxus* And *Podocarpus* spp.) and
- Privet (*Ligustrum* spp.)



TEMPERATURE

Topiary can be Tropical, needing a nighttime temperature of 60 degrees F. or warmer; or sub-tropical, needing a winter dormancy period for at least 6 to 10 weeks (below 60 degrees F). The ideal temperature is between 45 and 55 degrees F. at night. Sunrooms and Greenhouses work best; however, an unheated spare bedroom or basement will work. Over wintering outdoors should be done for temperate, or winter hardy plants that need colder temperatures below 45 degrees F. Place hardy plants in a protected area preferably in a cold frame, close to the house or in the garage. Wrapping the plant with burlap and the pot with bubble wrap will help protect the plants from the elements.

LIGHT

Most topiary should have a permanent growing area close to a window that has at least 2 to 4 hours of direct sunlight. Then on special occasions, they can be moved briefly (up to 3 days) to tables or mantles for display. The only exception would be Hedera ivy; this plant will need filtered bright light, no direct sun. Remember to turn the plant $\frac{1}{4}$ turn every time the plant is watered. This will encourage even growth. During the summer, topiary can live out on the patio. They should be under partial shade and protected from severe conditions (wind, hail and freezing temperatures).

WATER

Allow the top $\frac{1}{3}$ rd of the soil to dry down each time between watering. Use a moisture meter or dig your finger into the soil to determine if the plant needs more water. This drying out of the surface between watering is especially important during the resting period from fall till mid spring.

Because topiary is usually in a small pot and possibly root bound, they will need to be watered frequently and thoroughly. Submerge the plant to allow the soil to become saturated. After it has quit bubbling, remove the plant from the water. Do not let the plant sit in water for long periods of time. Drain excess water from the tray. Some plants may have sensitivity to chlorine and fluoride; allow the water to sit over night for the gasses to escape.

FERTILIZER

Use a 20-20-20 all-purpose liquid fertilizer half strength, every other watering to once a month, during the growing season or a in the spring use a slow release fertilizer like **Osmocote™** for houseplants that will last for 4 to 6 months.

PESTS

Topiary, like most garden plants can get some pests. Some plants are predisposed to pests, such as Ivy is to spider mites and laurels are to scales. The best way to eradicate these suckers is to physically remove by dunking or washing off the leaves and stems with soapy, sudsy water. Use a liquid dish detergent that has no lotions and is biodegradable.

Fill up a bucket or sink with warm water. Add dish soap, 1Tbsp to a gallon of water; wrap a plastic bag around the pot, tight. Then turn the pot upside down and dunk the plant head first into the water, swishing vigorously around the leaves. Pull it out and set it aside to drain. Do not rinse off the soap... let it dry onto the plant. Repeat every 7 to 10 days for a couple of weeks. If the insects just won't go away, try an insecticide like Bayer rose and flower spray or a granular systemic insecticide. Remember to do a test spray first. Sometimes the plant will react adversely to the spray or soap.

TRIMMING

The more frequently topiary is trimmed, the more attractive its shape will be. Wrapping the long tendrils will only cause the plant to become leggy. Pruning the tendrils/branches by about 1/3rd to 1/2 will cause a more compact miniature appearance.

Creating Shapes

Wreath

Creating a living wreath isn't difficult. Start with a young plant (ivy or a pliable stemmed plant) and a wire support/frame. Plant two small plants in the container and gently bend each to follow the lines of the frame, securing it with stretch tape or twist tie. If possible, wind the stem around the wire to give it a firmer grasp and camouflage the support. Pinch the growing tip off. As the plant fills in, keep the side shoots clipped to encourage branching.

Stuffed Topiary (animal shapes):

These are easier than one-dimensional forms. Acquire chicken wire, make a frame and fill with damp coarse sphagnum moss. Plant directly into the moss with small plants (ivy, baby tears or creeping fig), spacing evenly around the topiary. Keep turning the frame every few days to expose all sides to light. Keep the inner moss evenly moist not allowing it to dry out. Soak weekly.

Standard Topiary (lollipop):

Start out with a plant that has a single stem (fuchsia, coleus, rosemary etc) stick a bamboo stake as close to the stem as possible into the soil. Tie the stem to the stake. As it grows, remove all side branches on the bottom 2 /3rds of the stem leaving a tuft of growth on top.

When it has reached the height you want, pinch the top and let the upper branches grow out to form a crown. All the while, the standard in-training will need constant rotating to make certain that the stem stays straight and the side branches grow out symmetrically.

Spirals and Cones:

Usually, the same shaping as the standard, but not removing the bottom branches and pruning to shape into a spiral or a cone.