

Making and caring for topiary

GWF384
Updated September 2007

Many plants can be clipped and shaped to form topiary, and you may already have plants in your garden that would be suitable. Here's how to have a go at this interesting technique.

Topiary is the name for training, cutting and trimming of plants into ornamental shapes. Small-leaved evergreens like box (*Buxus sempervirens*) and privet (*Ligustrum*) can be clipped into quite detailed shapes - shrubby honeysuckle (*Lonicera nitida*) is a faster alternative but needs frequent clipping and is relatively short-lived. *Euonymus fortunei* and cotton lavender (*Santolina chamaecyparissus*) can also be clipped into small ball shapes or low hedges eg for knot gardens. Large-leaved plants such as holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) and bay (*Laurus nobilis*) are best for simple designs such as lollipop-headed standards, cones and domes. Large growing deciduous plants, including beech (*Fagus sylvatica*), lime (*Tilia*) and hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*), as well as evergreens like yew (*Taxus baccata*) and Portuguese laurel (*Prunus lusitanica*), are ideal for creating large structural elements known collectively as green architecture.

Other plants worth trying include: Cotoneaster, *Hebe rakaiensis* *Ilex crenata* (Japanese holly, box-

leaved holly) *Osmanthus delavayi*; *O. x burkwoodii*, pyracantha (firethorn) *Rhamnus alaternus* (Italian buckthorn) *Viburnum tinus* (Laurustinus)

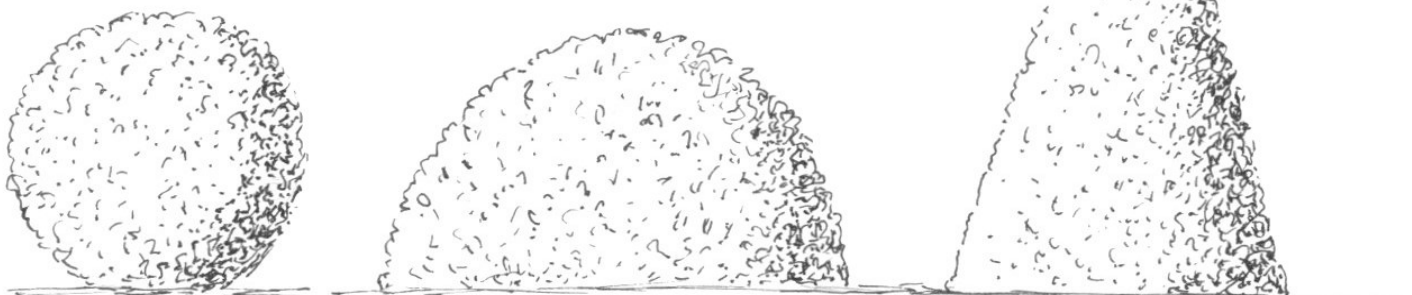
Ready-made topiary

The quality of bought topiary varies tremendously, so make sure when buying plants you choose those that are well clothed in foliage with no gaps, have no dead stems or discoloured leaves eg bronze colouring on box is a sign of stress. Look out for pests or diseases. Box is commonly infested with box psyllid, a sap-sucking insect that causes the shoot tips to distort like tiny Brussels sprouts. Two serious diseases or blights of box are *Volutella* (look for red/orange pustules under leaves and dieback) and *Cylindrocladium*. The latter is spread via cutting tools and there is currently no domestic treatment for this fatal disease. Symptoms include brown spotting on leaves, which coalesce to form larger areas; blackened stems and defoliation. Topiary should also be well-shaped and balanced eg the size of the head of a standard should be properly proportioned relative to the length and thickness of the

stem and fairly priced. Topiary, especially box, can be seriously overpriced with badly clipped, lopsided or damaged specimens sold at full price.

When to clip

Slow-growing, compact evergreens like box should be clipped a couple of times a year, normally towards the end of May/beginning of June and once more if necessary before the end of August. Avoid excess tidying of topiary as this can weaken the plant and increase the risk of disease. Fast-growing types like common privet need several cuts during the growing season. With yew, holly and bay, cut twice, the last cut at the end of summer. Quick-growing conifers eg cultivars of cupressus, chamaecyparis, thuja, leyland cypress - trim little and often through the growing season avoiding cutting deep into the plant, as older stems may be slow to regenerate.



Making shapes

To make a ball, dome or cone.

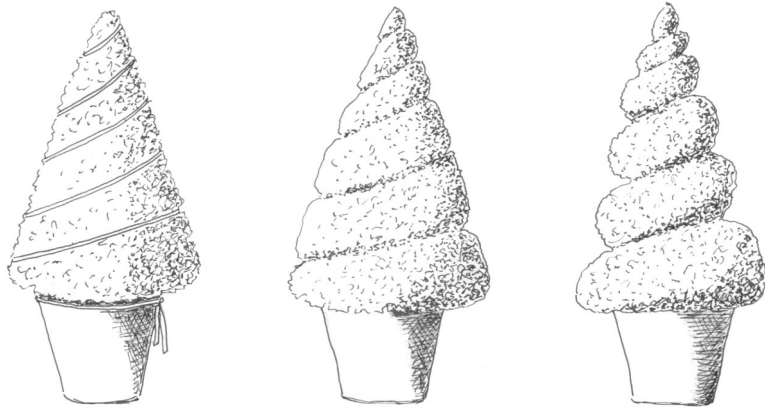
Start with a bushy, well-branched plant. Shape with a pair of good quality hand shears, but use secateurs or loppers to cut tougher stems. Domes are easier to maintain than balls because the foliage receives even light from top to bottom preventing die back. For cones, choose a plant with an upright habit and with a straight central stem. Create a simple wigwam frame of bamboo canes as a guide or a topiary frame. To clip geometric shapes, stand over the plant if possible so that you can assess symmetry more easily. With rounded shapes, turn hand shears over so that the blade follows the curve.

To make large pyramids from yew or beech, you can make a relatively inexpensive pyramid-shaped frame from roofing lathes with chicken wire infills to sit over the plant. Keep in situ as the shoots will grow through the wire mesh and obscure the frame.

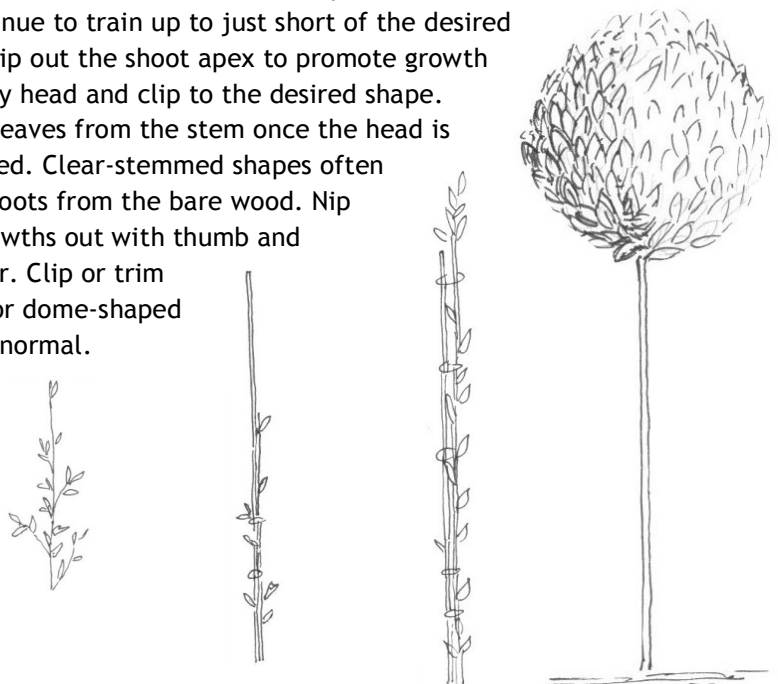
Using frames to form an animal with legs, put plants at each point that the frame touches the ground. Fill broad, low shapes set at ground level with several small plants. Guide stems into narrower or protruding parts of the frame and hold shoots in place through curved sections using soft twine. To clip, cut off any stems sticking out from the frame. Check ties used to temporarily hold shoots in place, replacing metal or rigid plastic ties with soft twine as these can start to cut into stems.

To reduce disease infections, after trimming, collect and remove all clippings. When clipping boxwood especially, you should frequently sterilise cutting tools to prevent spreading diseases eg between each individual piece of topiary or sections of hedging, using a garden disinfectant like Jeyes Fluid. In colder regions, move topiary

To make a spiral you should select a cone-shaped specimen with a central leader. The plant should have been clipped several times previously to create dense branching. Attach a piece of coloured string or narrow ribbon to the pot rim and wind round the plant to the tip, creating three to five spiral turns. Make the bottom section the widest and with a slightly shallower slant to create a snail shell profile. At first using secateurs, snip out a shallow groove then remove the string and continue to deepen the spiral. Round off the edges of the groove. When trimming a pre-trained spiral, mentally superimpose a cone shape and clip the outside of the spiral first. Then clip the spiral groove.



To make a standard you should select a plant with a straight central stem and cut off most of the side branches. Retain leaves arising directly from the stem as well as the shoot tip. Tie in to a cane and continue to train up to just short of the desired height. Nip out the shoot apex to promote growth of a bushy head and clip to the desired shape. Remove leaves from the stem once the head is established. Clear-stemmed shapes often sprout shoots from the bare wood. Nip these growths out with thumb and forefinger. Clip or trim the ball or dome-shaped heads as normal.



under cover (eg an unheated greenhouse) for the winter, as evergreens can suffer from frost damage and wind burn, or stand against a warm, sheltered wall. Protect bare stems of standards using lengths of foam pipe insulation. If you can't move plants, protect in situ by wrapping foliage with horticultural fleece.

Useful organisations

The European Boxwood and Topiary Society
Lynda Hinton, The Membership Secretary,
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Gloucestershire GL5 5WZ
www.boxwoodandtopiary.org