



# Topiaries

By Susanne v. Schroeder, Clear Creek Nursery

## **What are Topiaries and their Origin:**

Topiaries are: plants that have been trained and trimmed into ornamental shapes. In certain public and private gardens one can find collections of shrubs that have been shaped into elaborate menageries of animal forms and herbal knot gardens accented with the simpler standards - specimens trained with an erect center stem and a carefully shaped spherical or conical top.

The first recorded use of trained plants dates back to the first century B.C. and the Romans. Though it is believed that the Greeks learned this art in Persia after they conquered the region in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. The origin of the word “topiary” is Greek – “topia” referring to the rope used to tie the plants and “topos” meaning “landscape”. The Latin form “topiarius” referred to the artist and gardener who designed and worked on ornamental gardens.

During the Middle Ages, topiary art survived only in the small and enclosed gardens of monasteries, convents and castles. It developed further in Renaissance Italy, France and England, appearing about 1690 in America at Williamsburg, Virginia, where plants were trained in geometric shapes to accent knot gardens.

Raising topiaries in containers indoors began to interest American gardeners during the 1950s, with the resurgence in popularity of house plants. Particularly herb topiaries can graciously frame an entryway or decorate a table or windowsill. The time and effort spent in maintaining one of these sculptures are repaid in the charm, beauty and sometimes fragrance, it brings to a room or garden, and also in the additional culinary use of its trimmings.

For more information see following books: ‘Topiary Basics – The Art of Shaping Plants in Gardens & Containers’ by Margherita Lombardi & Christiana Serra Zanetti and ‘Topiaries & Espaliers’ by Linda Yang (Taylor’s Weekend Gardening Guides) and ‘Herb Topiaries’ by Sally Gallo

## **Plants suitable for Topiaries:**

- Abutilon (Flowering Maple)
- Coleus (the new Sun Coleuses are best)
- Fuchsia (upright varieties)
- Lantana
- Margurite Daisy (*Argyranthemum*)
- African Mallow (*Anisodonte*)
- Hibiscus
- Bougainvillea
- Princess Flower (*Tibouchina*)

## **Herbs:**

- Greek Myrtle (*Myrtus communis*)
- Rosemary (upright & trailing varieties)
- Lemon Verbena
- French Lavender (*L. dentata*)
- Green & Gray Santolina
- Sage (*Sage officinalis*)
- Sweet Bau (*Laurus nobilis*)
- Germander (*Teucrium chamaedrys*)
- Scented Geraniums

# Topiary Maintenance

Choosing the right container: Choose a container that is in harmony with the style of the room and garden. The plant sculpture is the center of interest, and the container should not be so ornate nor so large that it detracts from the plant.

As a rule, the size of the container should be in correct proportion to that of the mature plant. Consider the size of the foliage mass and the size of the root ball. Most pleasing to the eye is a pot equal in size to the head of the topiary growing in it. A good container must hold moisture long enough to supply a plant's needs, yet drain readily: it must have drainage holes in the bottom!

Clay versus plastic: Each has drawbacks as well as advantages. Base your decision on your pocket book and practical matters, like the size and location of the topiary etc.

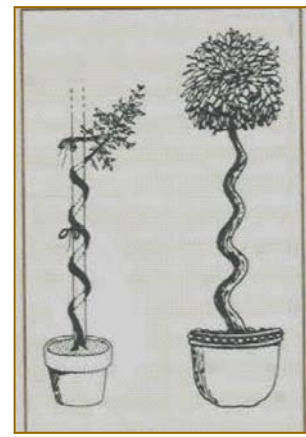
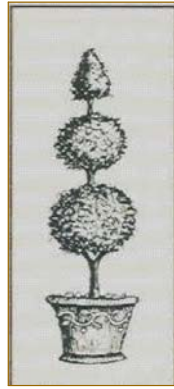
SOIL: In general use a soil that is light, porous and quick draining. The so called "soil-less" potting mixes work best. Get the highest quality you can buy (like Pro-Mix) - this really pays off in the long run! If you want to make your own mix, get some cheaper potting soil and add perlite or vermiculite or sand to lighten it up. Adding 10-20% wormcastings or compost always improves any mix!

WATER: The best way to check your plant is to pick it up and feel its weight. If it is light compared to how heavy it feels when wet and if the surface of the soil is dry - it's time to water. Containers too large to test by lifting can be checked with a moisture meter. Thoroughly drench the plant every time you water but never allow the pot to sit in the drainage water. Too much and too little water can cause root rot. But as you become familiar with your plants you will know when to water each one.

FERTILIZER: During the active spring and summer growing season fertilize every 10-14 days. A water-soluble fertilizer or fish emulsion are good choices. Herbs in general need less. My preferred choice is to incorporate a slow release fertilizer (like Osmocote or an organic granular fertilizer) into the potting mix or use it to topdress the plants. I use 1/2 the recommended rate plus a weak solution of liquid fertilizer every 10-14 days. This gives me better control and I can make adjustments depending on the weather. Reduce the frequency of feeding in late summer and fall, and don't feed at all during the winter months.

LIGHT: Topiaries growing outdoors need at least five hours of full sun daily to remain compact and bushy - depending on the variety. Indoors, a spot with a southern exposure is best. Supplement with grow lights if the plants get too leggy.

PRUNING: Regular pruning is necessary to maintain the shape of a topiary. During periods of rapid growth, you will probably need to trim it every other week; in winter, rarely or never. Trim the bottom of the plant first; new twigs often turn downward there. Then work up the sides to the top. Cut twigs of large-leaved plants, like Bay, to a leaf node, but simply trim smaller-leaved plants "haircut" fashion. Over time the top turns into a very tight ball that might need some thinning out. Reach into the center and cut out some of the older branches. Initially there will be a gap or hole, but it will fill in very quickly with new growth.



**ROOT PRUNING:** Eventually, a healthy, vigorous, well-maintained topiary will outgrow its pot, signaling its distress with yellowing leaves, daily wilting, and finally, by ceasing to grow altogether. Radical surgery is in order to revive it! First, cut back the foliage by about one-fourth. Then remove the plant from its pot. At this point, you may decide to move it to a larger pot, in which case slice off about 1/2-1 inch of the bottom roots and score those left on the sides to promote the formation of new roots. Loosen the roots and shake off some of the soil and replant in the new pot with fresh soil. Water thoroughly. Keep the plant out of the sun for 2-3 weeks, then gradually return it to its usual position. - With more radical pruning, even very mature topiaries can be retained in the same pot indefinitely. To accomplish this, slice off as much as one-third of the root ball and remove up to one-third of the roots from the sides. Place new soil in the bottom of the pot, replace the plant, add new soil on the sides, and water it thoroughly.

**OVERWINTERING:** Topiaries grow best outdoors in summer, but have to be moved indoors before the first frost. Most herbs actually prefer cool temperatures (40-50 F) and a bright spot. This is a resting period for the plant, therefore no fertilizing and only little watering. Keep the roots moist, but not wet. In dry air increase the humidity by misting regularly or setting the plant on a tray filled with water and pebbles. Also provide good air circulation.

Fuchsias and Lemon verbena can go completely dormant (dropping their leaves) and kept in a cool basement or garage at temperatures between 35-45 F.

Tropical plants, like Hibiscus, need warmer temperatures (>60 F) and as much light as possible.

Once spring arrives start fertilizing slowly and repot the plants, giving them new soil. Gradually move them outdoors as it warms up and enjoy them for another season.

**PESTS & DISEASES:** Most of the problems occur when topiaries are grown indoors. The most common pests are aphids, mites, whiteflies and fungus gnats. Repeated applications of insecticidal soap is an allround remedy and safe to use. Dip the head of a small topiary in a large pail of the solution or thoroughly drench bigger ones. Neem oil is another good product and has the added benefit to act as a fungicide. Fungus gnats are small, dark flies that fly up from the soil surface when disturbed. Their larvae do most of the damage by feeding on root hairs. If the infestation is heavy, repot the plant giving it new soil and cover the surface with sand or decorative pebbles or bark pieces etc. Fungus gnats are attracted to moist/wet soils with lots of peatmoss in it.

Rosemary is especially prone to powdery mildew. Neem oil works well and a product called 'E-RASE' (Jojoba oil). A home remedy of 1 Tbsp. baking soda, 1 Tbsp. vegetable oil and 1 Tbsp. of insecticidal soap in 1 gallon of water is supposed to suppress fungal diseases. This is more of a preventive measure not a cure.