

FANCY FOLIAGE

TOPIARIES BRING GENIUS TO YOUR HOME GARDEN

CAROL DALU
Master Gardener

Question: I like the perfectly trimmed look of topiaries and would like to know what shrubs are the best to use and how to create animal-shaped topiaries?

Answer: When I think of topiaries, the first thing to pop into my head is Disneyland. It is the first place I saw plants trimmed to such perfection and in the shapes of animals - what fun. The term topiary refers to both the practice of training plants by trimming into clearly defined shapes, either geometric or fanciful, as well as the actual plants that have been shaped this way.

The practice or art of topiary (living sculpture) has been around for centuries and has been practiced all over the world. European topiary dates back to Roman times and experienced a revival during the Renaissance, where it was common in both the gardens of the elite as well as simple cottage gardens. Traditional forms have foliage finely pruned into geometric shapes such as balls, cubes, pyramids, cones or tapering spirals.

Topiaries can be created a couple of different ways - either by pruning a plant into the shape or by growing and training the plant over a frame. Depending on the process you choose, it may determine the plants used to make the topiary. When pruning a plant into a shape, it is best to use evergreen shrubs with small leaves and thick, dense foliage. Some of the most

commonly used plants include boxwood (*Buxus*), holly (*Ilex*), laurel (*Prunus*) and privet (*Ligustrum*). Those with larger leaves, such as laurel and privet, work well when creating larger shapes and hedges. For smaller topiaries, the dwarf boxwoods ("*Suffruticosa*") work well. If you are considering taller shapes, like pyramids, cylinders, spirals or cones, taller-growing shrubs with dense leaf or needle structures work well. Commonly used plants include yew (*Taxus*), arborvitae (*Thuja*) and spruce (*Picea*).

When using a frame to create a specific form (geometric or fanciful, such as an animal), there are a couple of different approaches. One option is to begin with a small, young shrub that can be trained as it grows and put the frame over the plant. As it grows and fills in, the frame is your guide to prune into the shape. Keep in mind this is a slow process, a living sculpture that will take time and patient pruning.

The other way to create topiaries over a frame is by using vines. The possibilities are limitless, as vines can be trained into simple to intricate shapes. A couple of commonly used vines are creeping fig (*Ficus pumila*) and noninvasive cultivars of ivy (*Hedera helix*) such as "Lady Frances," "Golden Ingot" or "Teardrop." Both have small leaves that easily grow over and around a wire or mesh frame and can be trimmed into a shape. Although it is not



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This crafty, sculptural giraffe would be a delight in any garden.



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Topiaries can take on fanciful shapes, such as animals.

necessary, filling the frame with sphagnum moss when the topiary is young helps it look fuller until the frame is completely covered by the vine.

Creating your own topiary takes time and patience but brings the satisfaction of your own

living sculpture and neatly trimmed shrubs. Fall is a great time to prune, so is a good time to begin shaping a topiary. If you are looking for fully formed topiaries, these can often be found at your local garden retailer. This eliminates the waiting time for the



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form to develop, and you only need to maintain the shape with regular pruning.

Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardeners Plant

Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-236-3052, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.