TOPIARY

How to grow and maintain topiary

Topiary - the art or practice of training, cutting, and trimming trees or shrubs into odd or ornamental shapes.

**Criteria for choosing plant material:**

1) Evergreen plants

2) Plants that have a leaf size proportionate to the size of the finished

topiary and to the detail of the topiary.

3) Plants that suite their location - sunny, shady, right soil, etc.

Optional characteristics that fit the topiary are color and texture.

**Some suitable plants for topiary:**

(zone information and partial descriptions from Sunset Western Garden Book)

Myrsine africana. AFRICAN BOXWOOD. Evergreen shrub that grows to 3-8’;

slightly floppy when young, but stiffens up into dense rounded bush easily kept at

3-4 feet with moderate roundish, 1/2 inch leaves. Grows well in full sun or part

shade with reasonable drainage. Smog resistant, relatively pest free, although

susceptible to red spider mites and occasionally, brown scale. Drought tolerant.

Zones 8, 9, 14-24. Works well from 10” animal topiary to 3’ or 4’ sizes.

Buxus microphylla japonica. JAPANESE BOXWOOD. Zones 3b-24. Compact

foliage is lively bright green in summer, turns brown or bronze in winter. ‘Green

Beauty’ holds is green color in winter and is considerably greener than B.m.

japonica in summer heat. ‘Winter Gem’ is the hardiest of the Japanese

boxwoods.

Buxus sempervirens ‘Elegantissima’. VARIEGATED BOXWOOD. A beautiful

variegated boxwood. Best in morning sun with protection from afternoon sun in

the hot valley climate. Hardy to zone 6. Slow grower but worth waiting for as it

shows beautifully with all green plants as a backdrop.

Chamaecyparis thyoides ‘Ericoides’. Full sun, good drainage is critical. Zone 5-8.

Soft feathery texture, cute on little bears. Red plum winter color.

Cotoneaster dammeri ‘lowfast’. COTONEASTER. Evergreen, zones 2- 24. Fast,

prostrate growth to 1 ft. high, unless one lifts up the plant and ties it to a topiary,

then it will grow to a least 30”. Leaves are bright glossy green, fruit bright red.

COTONEASTER ‘Glaucophylla’ has a gray cast, might be fun for little elephant

and lamb topiary.

Cupressocyparis sempervirens. ITALIAN CYPRESS. Upright habit with bright

green foliage. Zones 2-24. Full sun, little to moderate water. Italian Cypress is

good for four- legged animal topiary, especially when height is needed, such as a

giraffe topiary.

Euonymus fortunei ‘Emerald Gaiety’. Evergreen shrub or vine. Zones 2b-17. Sun

or shade. Dense-growing, erect shrub with deep green leaves edged in white.

‘Emerald n’ Gold’ is similar but with gold-edged leaves. The length of the vines

makes it possible to train this plant as a spiral, tabletop heart, star or

hummingbird on a stem as well as animal topiary under 30” in height. The winter

color on each of these is beautiful, adding pinks to ‘Emerald Gaiety’ and reds to

‘Emerald ‘n Gold’.

Euonymus japonicus ‘microphylla’ BOX-LEAF EUONYMUS. Compact, small leafed shrub to 1-2 ft. high and half as wide. Zones 4-9. Slow growing, good for

very small animal topiary up to 24”.

Microphyllus Variegatus is like ‘Microphyllus’, but with white-splashed leaves, and

even slower growing.

Hedera helix. IVY. Zones 3-24. The many cultivars of ivy offer a wide variety of

options for topiary. Its speed of growth allows some table top topiary frames to fill

in very quickly. In fact with long ivies its possible to have an instant topiary. The

range of cultivars includes miniature to large leaves, curly, variegated, spotted

and heart shaped leaves. It also works well for stuffed topiary and trained up

topiary. Patricia Riley Hammer’s The New Topiary book has a very informative ivy

chart for choosing the right kind of ivy for topiary.

Lonicera nitida. BOX HONEYSUCKLE. Evergreen shrub. Zones 4-9, 14-24.

Branches densely clothed in tiny, egg-shaped, shiny dark green leaves that may

turn an attractive bronze to plum color in winter. Grows fast but is easily pruned.

Tiny leaves allow for more detail in topiary. Afternoon shade in the valley climate

protects them from burning. ‘Baggesen’s Gold’ has foliage that is golden with

more sun, and chartreuse in shade. ‘Lemon Beauty’ has a green center with

yellow edging making it a stand out in the garden.

Myrtus communis. MYRTLE. Evergreen shrub. Glossy bright green leaves are

pointed, 2 inch long, pleasantly aromatic when bruised or brushed against.

White, sweet-scented, 3/4 inch long flowers bloom in summer, followed by bluish

black berries. Takes any soil, but good drainage is essential. ‘Variegata’ fits the

basic description but has white-edged foliage. This is an excellent topiary plant

when detail is important because the leaves are so small. It takes full to partial

sun and little to moderate water.

Olea europaea. OLIVE. Willow like foliage is a soft gray green that combines well

with most colors. Olives withstand heavy pruning. They are most lush when

growing in deep, rich soil but will also grow in shallow, alkaline, or stony soil and

with little fertilizer. They thrive in areas with hot, dry summers. Zones 8, 9,11-24.

Olive tree is good for large topiaries in the valley climate. The grayish color also

stands out in a green landscape.

Pyracantha fortuneana ‘Graberi’. Fast and vigorous grower, filling a topiary

quickly but also requiring more pruning than other plants. It produces white

flowers in the spring followed by berries which may last into winter. It also has

needle like thorns. Zones 4-24.

Rosmarinus officinalis. ROSEMARY. Evergreen shrub, herb. Rugged,

picturesque, to 2-6 ft. high. Narrow, aromatic leaves glossy dark green above,

grayish white beneath. Blooms lavender blue, (some white or pink) in winter and

spring, occasionally repeats in fall. Endures hot sun and poor soil, but good

drainage is a must. Works well on small topiary animals. Zones 4-24.

Serissa. Small, shiny leaves with delicate branching pattern make this a favorite

bonsai or container subject. It grows best in morning sun and afternoon shade

with moderate water. Hardy to 25 degrees, then it drops its leave but retains the

branch structure. If stressed it may drop its leaves. If so, don’t water until it puts

out new leaves. The tiny, delicate flowers make this a very unique topiary, worth

the extra trouble!