

#25 Plants as Ornament in the Landscape

Written by Mitzi VanSant

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For several weeks we have been discussing the use and placement of ornament in the garden. This week we will focus on plants as ornament, and specifically plant topiary.

Topiary, or plant materials closely clipped to form geometric or representative shapes, is more commonly seen in classical or old fashioned gardens than in modern ones. Plants used in topiary are evergreen, have small leaves or needles, produce dense foliage, and have a compact growth habit. Common plants used for topiary include cultivars of Boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*), Bay Laurel (*Laurus nobilis*), Holly (*Ilex* spp.), Myrtle (*Myrtus* species), Yew (*Taxus* species), and Privet (*Ligustrum* species.)

Trained topiary is available from specialty nurseries and garden centers, and comes in a variety of shapes from standards (shrubs clipped up to form single stemmed trees of various shapes), to spheres, cones, pyramids, and even corkscrews. Alternatively, you can start from scratch, and train your own; this can take many years in the case of slow growing plant materials.

Another option is to purchase wire frames, plant them with faster growing vines such as ivy, jasmine, or other evergreen climbers, and then train the new growth to the desired shape. In one of the smallest gardens I've ever designed, I devoted an area to a circular tricycle pathway, and installed regularly spaced animal shaped topiary frames and ivy to cover them. The children of the house were delighted.

Where other garden ornament is better limited to one or two pieces within a sight line, topiary benefits from repetition. The placement of two clipped box spheres or cones at the entry to a garden room can define the change of location. A row of regularly spaced boxwood or other small-leaved shrubs, clipped into rectangles or other geometric shapes, can guide the garden visitor along an axial pathway. A low clipped hedge might enclose a planting of roses, herbs, or other perennials and give definition to the garden when deciduous plant materials are without leaves in winter. This form of garden ornament is not for those wishing for a low maintenance garden, however. The manicuring must be done by someone with time, skill, and patience, and executed at the proper stages of growth.

If interested in visiting a topiary garden, there is a large one located on the front lawn of the grounds at Cook Children's Hospital in Fort Worth, Texas. Animal topiary is the specialty and a wide variety of fauna are represented. To purchase topiary locally, visit [Sledd's Nursery](#) in Central West Austin.

Plant of the Week

Ilex vomitoria 'Nana' or Dwarf Yaupon

This central Texas native is evergreen, with smaller leaves and more dense form than the typical Yaupon Holly. Growing to 2 feet high, and twice as wide, it can be shorn into almost any shape desired. It does fruit, but the berries are tiny and inconspicuous. The dwarf form is also very drought tolerant, and less invasive than the standard species. Use it instead of the

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more common boxwood.