



Indoor Topiary Plants

Topiary is the art of creating sculptures using living trees and shrubs by pruning and clipping (unlike Bonsai, which is the art of growing and training plants to conform to a miniature form). The word derives from the Latin meaning “creator of places”. It was introduced by Caesar in Tuscany, who grew interesting shapes like ciphers, obelisks, and animal shapes that brought a plain garden to life and produced a miniature landscape (topos).

The trees and shrubs that are used in topiary are usually evergreen and have naturally small leaves or needles, creating dense foliage and have compact and/or columnar growth habit. Vines (Hedera and creeping Fig) are sometimes used over a shaped wire frame or cage to create a specific shape. The most common plants (but not limited to) used without a frame are: **Boxwood** (*Buxus sempervirens*), **Laurels** (*Laurus nobilis* and *Ficus benjamina*), **Holly** (*Ilex* spp), **Myrtles** (*Eugenia* and *Myrtus* spp.), **Yews** (*Taxus* and *Podocarpus* spp.) and **Privet** (*Ligustrum* spp.).

- **Temperature:** Topiary can be **tropical**, needing a night temperature of 60 degrees F. or warmer, or **sub-tropical**, requiring a winter dormancy period for at least 6 to 10 weeks (below 60 degrees F). The ideal temperature is between 45 and 55 degrees F. at night. Sunrooms and Greenhouses work best, but an unheated bedroom or basement will work. Over-wintering outdoors should be done for **temperate** or winter hardy plants that need colder temperatures below 45 degrees F. Place hardy plants in a protected area, preferably in a cold frame, close to the house or in the garage. Wrapping the plant with burlap and the pot with bubble wrap will help protect the plants from the elements.
- **Light:** Most topiary should have a permanent growing area close to a window that has at least 2 to 4 hours of direct sunlight. The only exception is Hedera ivy; this plant will need filtered bright light, no direct sun. On special occasions they can be moved briefly (up to 3 days) to tables or mantles for display. Remember to turn the plant ¼ turn every time you water. This will encourage even growth. During the summer, topiary can live out on a patio. They should be under partial shade and protected from severe conditions (wind, hail, and freezing temperatures).
- **Water:** Allow the top 1/3rd of the soil to dry each time before watering. Use a moisture meter or dig your finger into the soil to determine if the plant needs more water. Allowing the soil surface to dry before watering is especially important during dormancy from Fall till mid-Spring.

Because topiary is usually in a small pot and often root-bound, they will need to be watered frequently and thoroughly. Submerge the plant to allow the soil to become saturated. You will notice bubbles emerging on the surface as air is displaced. Once this bubbling has ceased, remove the plant from the water. Do not let the plant sit in water for a long period of time. Drain excess water from the tray. Some plants can have sensitivity to chlorine and fluoride; before submerging, allow the water to sit over night for gases to escape.

- **Humidity:** Some plants require more humid conditions, and especially in the winter months when the air is particularly dry, providing adequate humidity is a must. This can be achieved by placing the plant on a pebble tray or saucer that is four inches or larger than the base of the pot, fill with gravel/pebbles and water. Make sure the plant does not sit in the water. Misting the undersides of the leaves and the air surrounding the plant will also help.



- **Fertilizer:** Use a 20-20-20 all-purpose liquid fertilizer at half-strength, every other time you water or once a month during the growing season, or in the spring use a slow release fertilizer like Osmocote for houseplants (lasts between 4 and 6 months).
- **Pests:** Topiary, like most garden plants, can acquire some pests. Some plants are predisposed to pests, such as many ivies are to spider mites and laurels are to scales. The best way to eradicate these pests is to physically remove them by dunking or washing off the leaves and stems with soapy, sudsy water. Use a liquid dish detergent (make sure you choose one that is both biodegradable and free of lotions). Fill up a bucket or sink with warm water. Add 1 tablespoon of dish soap to a gallon of water. Wrap a plastic bag tightly around the plant's pot and turn the whole thing upside down and dunk the plant in head first, swishing vigorously around the leaves. Pull it out and set it aside to drain. **Don't rinse** off the soap... let it dry onto the plant. Repeat every 7 to 10 days for a couple of weeks. If the insect persists, try an insecticide like **Bayer rose and flower spray** or a granular systemic insecticide. Remember to do a test spray first, as some plants may react adversely to the spray or soap.
- **Trimming:** The more frequently your topiary is trimmed, the more attractive its shape will be. Wrapping long tendrils will only cause the plant to become leggy. Pruning the tendrils/branches by about 1/3rd to ½ their length will ensure a more compact appearance.
- **Creating Shapes**
 - **Wreath:** creating a living wreath isn't difficult. Start with a young plant (ivy or a pliable stemmed plant) and a wire support/frame. Plant two small plants in the container and gently bend each to follow the lines of the frame, securing it with stretch tape or twist tie. If possible, wind the stem around the wire to give it a firmer grasp and camouflage the support. Pinch the growing tip off. As the plant fills in, keep the side shoots clipped to encourage branching.
 - **Stuffed Topiary** (animal shapes): This is easier to achieve than one-dimensional forms. Using chicken wire, make a frame and fill with damp, coarse sphagnum moss. Plant small plants directly into the moss (ivy, baby tears or creeping fig), spacing evenly around the topiary. Keep turning the frame every few days to expose all sides to sunlight. Keep the inner moss evenly moist, not allowing it to dry out. Soak the whole topiary in water weekly.
 - **Standard Topiary** (lollipop): Start out with a plant that has a single stem (fuchsia, coleus, rosemary etc.), stick a bamboo stake as close to the stem as possible into the soil. Tie the stem to the stake. As it grows, remove all side branches on the bottom 2/3^{rds} of the stem leaving a tuft of growth on top. When it reaches the height you want, pinch the top and let the upper branches grow out to form a crown. All the while, it will need constant rotating to make certain that the stem stays straight and the side branches grow out symmetrically.
 - **Spirals and cones:** These are generally achieved using the same shaping methods as the standard topiary (minus the removal of bottom branches) and pruning to shape into a spiral or a cone.