

TOPIARY IN EUROPE AND ITS FUTURE IN FLORIDA

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Abstract. Cicero was said to be the first to write about topiary in 54 BC. Splendid examples exist today in Italy, France and England. It is becoming better known in Florida because of environmental interest, knowledgeability, and adaptability of more species of plants. Retirees find growing plants in the image of their choosing both relaxing and enjoyable.

Topiary is the 2,000-year or more art of pruning and shaping trees or plants in unusual designs. It was revived and made possible by the aristocracy and affluent classes of people in Europe for over 200 years.

Cicero was probably the first to write about topiary in 54 BC. The Roman naturalist Gaius Plinius Secundus (23-79) wrote of boxwood cut into the shape of animals. Practically all classic gardens in Italy laid out before the end of the 18th century had topiary of some kind.

According to Georgina Masson (3) in her publication *Italian Gardens*, some Italian gardens presently featuring topiary work include: the villa Muti at Frascati with its enormous gracefully curved boxwood borders laid out in geometric patterns; the villa Cuzzano near Verona built for the Allegrì family in the 17th century, and now owned by the Arvedi family, still preserves its original garden layout composed of perfectly clipped cone-shaped yews on the terrace and stately cypress framing the garden; the castle of Count Baldvino standing on a high peak of the Apennines at Montaldo di Pavia has one of the finest topiary gardens in Italy featuring gigantic yews flawlessly sheared into square and cylindrical designs topped with a globose crown.

In my correspondence with Mrs. Masson (pseudonym) in Italy, she wrote that today, Italy does not have the fanciful shapes of plants in the form of blackbirds, peacocks, and coffee pots as was the vogue in England during the 18th century, but there are some examples in England that still exist.

Sir George Taylor, Director of the Royal Botanical



Fig. 1. *Podocarpus*.

Gardens in England wrote me that some of the best old topiary, some over 200 years old, and also modern examples are located in the following gardens: Levens Hall, (old) Kendal, Westmoreland; Sudely Castle, Winchcombe and Rous Lynch Court, both in Gloucestershire; Packwood House (old), Mockley Heath, Warwickshire; Compton Wyn-



Fig. 2. *Ficus* in a nursery—West Palm Beach.

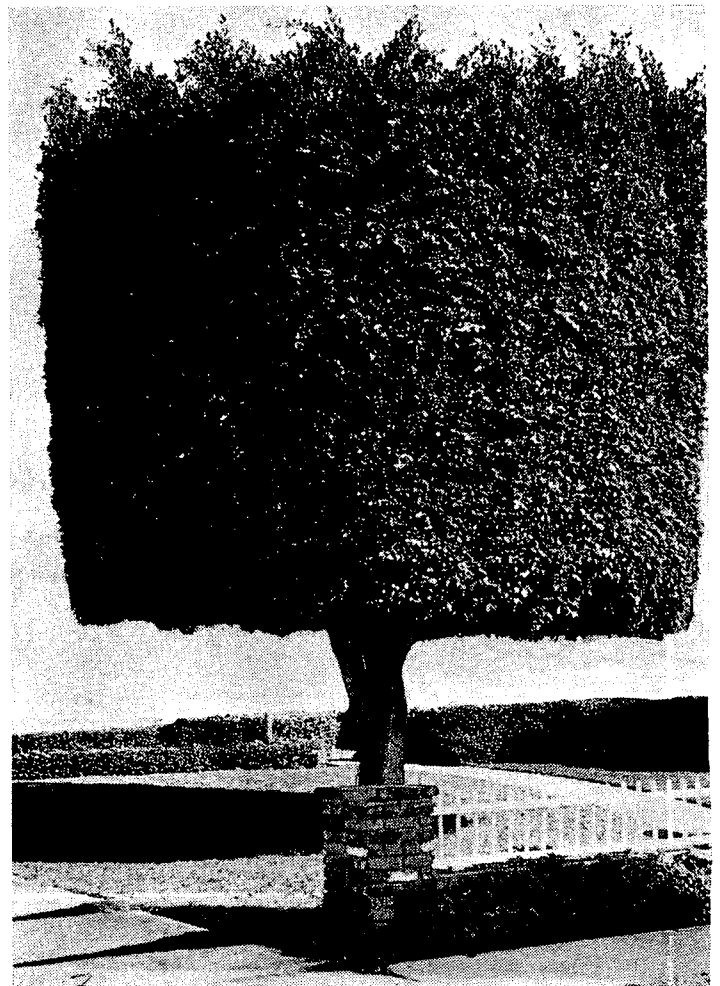


Fig. 3. *Ficus nitida*—Palm Beach.

gates, Branbury, Warwickshire; Hever Castle, near Edenbridge, Kent.

The designs were rather fantastic and were prized according to how difficult they were to produce and to keep in a state of perfection. Some of these designs were baskets, coffee pots, animals, birds, pyramids, archways, tunnels, porch, cones, balls, and tetrahedrons (like a pyramid, but with a flat top). The plants used were yew, hawthorn, privet, holly, boxwood, juniper, cypress, and oak *Quercus ilex* L.



Fig. 4. *Ficus benjamina* near Coral Gables.



Fig. 5. *Thuja*—Cactus Motel in Mexico.

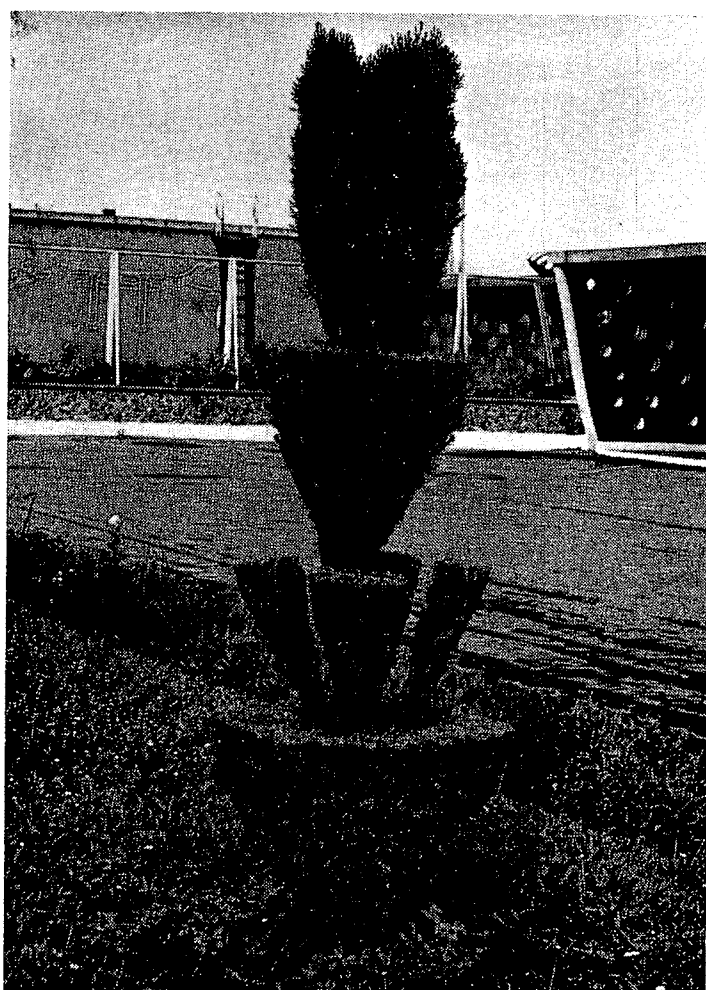


Fig. 6. *Thuja*—Cactus Motel in Mexico.

Retirees have discovered that keeping a plant carved in the image of his choosing has a mental therapy both relaxing and an enjoyable recreation. It takes time, consistent pruning, shearing, and knowledge of the plant's growth characteristics. A retired man in West Palm Beach told me it took his full time to keep his *Melaleuca leucadendra* L. pruned. They were sculptured like toadstools, uniformly 12 ft high, planted in a straight row for 200 ft along his driveway. Many years ago I saw a sculptured whale 60 ft long made from *Casuarina* in the Sarasota area. Some of the most beautiful globes and columns are in Palm Beach. These are mostly *Ficus* and *Casuarina*. Many years ago there were some magnificent *Podocarpus* topiary in Tampa. They have since been cut down.

Only a small amount of equipment is needed to make and maintain topiary subjects. The few implements include a pair of hedge shears, pruning shears, string, spirit level, a length of lumber for a straight edge, small saw, and ladder.

Today, with the horticultural knowledge and the innumerable plant species available in Florida ornamental nurseries, anyone can afford to own and keep one or more topiary designs.

Florida has many genera that make good topiary subjects. Just a few of them are; *Buxus*, *Casuarina*, *Cupressus*, *Eugenia*, *Ficus*, *Hibiscus*, *Ilex*, *Ixora*, *Juniper*, *Magnolia grandiflora* L., *Podocarpus*, *Pyracantha*, especially the var. 'Low Dense', *Taxus*, and *Thuja*.

Several Florida nurseries propagate and sell good topiary stock. If you have keen observation and imagination, it is possible to find overgrown field stock in some nurseries that



Fig. 7. *Thuja*—Cactus Motel in Mexico.

is in worthless condition for landscaping but has the framework and potentiality for a fabulous topiary specimen. The species selected must conform to weather and growing conditions in the area where it is planted.

Plants should have a growth type with possibilities of what is expected to be achieved. If a cone, globose, square, or pyramid is desired, a spreading or globose growing plant with many stems and branches arising at or near ground level should be chosen. It takes a greater period of time to produce dense foliage on lower branches than at the top of the plant. Poodles and lollipops are usually made from single-trunked plants that grow naturally erect or columnar. Plants used for archways must have the same growth habit, they may have several trunks instead of one.

In order to keep plants sheared in the required shape, there are several important basic facts. Cones or any circular work are easier to shear than are flat surfaces. It is better to cut away less than is anticipated than too much. Shearing should be done at the right time during first growth rather than later when much growth has been produced.

A single trunk, in order to remain smooth, must have all lateral branches pruned and any protrusion cut smoothly with a knife. New growth from the trunk should be pruned when young and soft. Trunks and branches may be forced and trained into a 360 degree circle. This must be done slowly with young growth. Use caution when jigs, wires, weights, and turnbuckles are used to distort branches. Ample padding must be provided to avoid cutting, bruising bark or girdling of stems.

This writer does not recommend that we go back to the fanciful figures, i.e., tea pots and blackbirds since it was this contortion of nature that promulgated writers in the early 18th century to censure this practice of abomination towards nature.

Topiary today, like much of it in the past, can be used to advantage in formal designs, as accents or stately subjects in specific areas. It should be used in a location where it may be seen and complementary to adjacent landscaping. A well maintained specimen will attract attention and be admired by many with artistic appreciation.

Literature Cited

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