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Indoor Topiary

If you're thinking of topiary as a living sculpture project, consider building a small-scale table top topiary to try out a few of the techniques involved, develop some of your ideas, and inspire enthusiasm with the topic. Using common houseplants like ivy and philodendron or fragrant herbs such as rosemary and lavender you can create both two-dimensional and three-dimensional topiaries.

Objectives

- Becoming familiar with topiary techniques on a small scale before trying a bigger project.
- Learn to use tools and materials involved with topiary like wire cutters, pliers, and sphagnum moss.
- Understand the horticultural requirements of this art form.
- Try out ideas for a larger, more complex project.
- Use your imagination!

Two-Dimensional Topiary

In 2-D topiaries, plants are trained to a single-layer (flat) wire frame.



A 2-D wreath shaped frame planted with rosemary.
<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/05330/612557.stm>



A 3-D butterfly shaped frame planted with ivy.
<http://www.topiaryartworks.com/tosmbu.html>

Materials

- Sturdy pot
- Potting soil
- Light-gauge wire or a wire coat hanger
- Wire cutters
- Pliers
- Florist tape or twist ties
- Plant(s): try and ivy plant with two long, leafy stems

Time Required

60 minutes

Directions

If you can grow a houseplant, you can grow a topiary! Topiaries may require a little more attentive care at first when it comes to watering but once established are fairly easy to maintain.

1. Gather everything you need on a table or other work surface.
2. Using the light-gauge wire or coat hanger and your pliers and wire cutters, bend and twist the wire to create a frame in the shape you've designed. Or, use a pre-made frame.
3. Position and anchor your frame into the center of your newly filled pot.
4. Transplant your ivy or other houseplant as desired in your pot and water well.
5. Carefully weave the stem or stems of your plant along your frame.
6. Use florists tape or twist ties to secure the stem to the frame.

Taking care of your 2-D topiary is much like caring for a houseplant. It will need the appropriate light, water, and fertilization for the type of plant you've chosen. As the plant grows, repeat steps 5 and 6 to weave and secure new growth. If your topiary starts looking a little shaggy and overgrown, simply trim with scissors.

Going further...

Nothing says you have to stay indoors with topiary. Outdoor topiary utilizes the same techniques just with different plant materials. Often the projects are larger in scale but they don't have to be.

Three-Dimensional Topiary

In 3-D topiaries, a three-dimensional frame is stuffed with sphagnum moss, which serves as the planting medium. Plants are planted through the frame and into the moss.



<http://www.topiaryartworks.com/betost.html>



<http://www.topiaryartworks.com/babyteddybear.html>

Materials

- A purchased 3-D topiary frame
or
- Light gauge wire or chicken wire to create your own frame
- Wire cutters and pliers (if making your own frame)
- Sphagnum moss
- Tub to soak moss in prior to working with it
- Florist tape or twist ties
- Plants (with 3-D topiary you may want to start with 2-3 plants
** look for plants in small, 4" pots with long trailing stems)
- Clear microfilament, e.g. fishing line
- Fern pins or hair pins

Time Required

1-2 hours

Directions

Making your own two-dimensional topiary frames is quite easy and a lot simpler than making 3-D frames. If you're interested in making your own frames rather than purchasing them, consider starting with a 2-D project to get familiar with the wire and tools.

Preparing the frame

1. If you're making your own frame rather than using a purchased one, decide on the shape and material you'd like to use. Remember that if

it's easy to recognize your shape (bird, bear, frog) looking at the frame, the more recognizable your topiary will be.

Note: There are also 3-dimensional frames in simple shapes such as spheres; a quick search on-line will show you where you can purchase them inexpensively, particularly if you purchase by the case.

- There are several approaches to making your own frame.
 - Free Form: a free form shape will have a more casual, less detailed appearance and is good for basic shapes like spheres and cones or simple animal shapes like a cat or dog's head with ears. In this method you use the materials at hand to make a shape by trying things out and adjusting as needed.
 - Wrap Around: in the wrap around method you'll need an object to base your frame on. People have used stuffed animals, small garden statues, and toys. The light-gauge wire or chicken wire is wrapped around the object, hand pressed to reveal the same details as the object before the object is carefully removed.
 - Sculpt: like the free form method you'll be shaping by hand. However, more attention is paid to detail and may require cutting and reattaching wire in certain places to achieve the desired effect.
2. Estimate the amount of sphagnum moss you'll need to fill the entire interior of your frame. Soak the sphagnum moss until it's soft and completely soaked. This may take a while, at least an hour and sometimes more depending on how much you're using.
 3. While the moss is soaking, make sure to water the plants you'll be using well in their existing pots. Dry plants will have a harder time adjusting to the new sphagnum moss growing medium. You'll want to let your plants sit at least an hour after you've watered them before you begin transplanting into your topiary.

Stuffing the frame

1. Start stuffing the moss in the smaller areas of your frame first, like legs, tails, or ears. Be sure to pack it tightly and as evenly as possible. The moss will shrink a bit when it dries and tightly packed areas will better hold moisture.
2. Using clear microfilament, wind around the small areas as you stuff them.
3. Next stuff the larger areas of your frame in the same way. This time, leave a few pockets where you anticipate planting your plants. Again,

use the microfilament, winding often and tightly around the frame to keep the moss in place.

Planting the topiary

You want to plant your plants into the largest parts of your frame, leading the trailing stems along the frame and around smaller areas.

1. As you remove the plants from their pots, try to leave as much soil as possible around the roots. If the roots and soil are too big for the pockets you've created, gently remove some of the soil until your root ball is small enough to fit.
2. Be sure that all roots are well within the moss and covered completely by the moss and pack firmly.
3. Lead the trailing stems along the moss from where they are planted to and around the smaller areas. Secure the stems with fern or hair pins. Be sure that the entire stem is pressed against the moss. Most plants will develop roots at the points in which the stem touches the damp moss. The roots grow into the moss, anchoring your topiary event more.
4. Take a step back and look for any stray or large leaves that detract from the shape you're hoping for. Trim the excess to give the shape you desire.

Caring for your topiary

1. For the first few days, keep your topiary in a shady spot and using a spray bottle, mist with water 3-5 times daily. This will help the plants root and get established.
2. After 3-5 days, move your topiary to a spot where it will get the appropriate amount of light.
3. Watering is very important because moss-filled forms dry out easily. Mist with a spray bottle daily and soak in a bucket or shower weekly.
4. Pinch new growth to promote side shoots, which can be woven and pinned just the like the original plants.
5. Trim back any excess growth that detracts from the shape you're trying to achieve.
6. Fertilize with a water-soluble houseplant fertilizer as needed.

As plants grow, simply attach the runners to the frame using florist tape or twist ties until the sculpture is covered to your satisfaction. If your sculpture begins to look a little shaggy you can simply use scissors to trim.

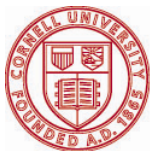
Houseplants for Indoor Topiaries

Ivy isn't the only houseplant suitable for tabletop, indoor topiaries. Look for plants with vining or creeping characteristics or consider fragrant herbs such as rosemary or lavender.

Aluminum Plant ~ *Pilea microphylla*
Baby's Tears ~ *Helxine soleirolii*
Columnea ~ *Columnea species*
Creeping Fig ~ *Ficus pumila*
Grape Ivy ~ *Rhoicissus rhomboidea*
Heart Leaf Philodendron ~ *Philodendron scandens*
Ivy - *Hedera helix*
Jasmine ~ *Jasminum polyanthum*
Lavender ~ *Lavendula spp.*
Pellionia ~ *Perllionia pulchra*
Pothos ~ *Scindapsus aureus*
Purple Velvet Plant ~ *Gynura aurantiaca*
Rosemary Vine ~ *Ceropegia woodii*
Scented Geranium ~ *Pelargonium spp.*
Sedums ~ *Sedum species*
Strawberry Begonia ~ *Saxifraga stolonifera*
Sweet Bay ~ *Laurus nobilis*
Wax Flower ~ *Hoya carnosia*

Going further...

The topiaries seen growing outdoors in gardens and parks use a very similar method as the indoor topiaries. They are just often bigger and utilize different plants. Sculpting shrubs into shapes is another form of outdoor topiary to explore.



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Resources for educators, volunteers, and parents working with children and youth.

Cornell Garden-Based Learning Program website: www.hort.cornell.edu/gbl