

Modern Topiary

By Darren Lerigo

About The Author

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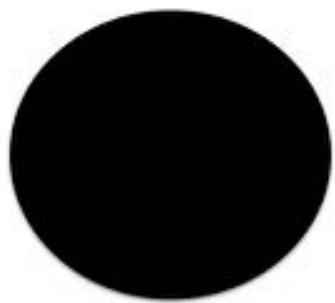
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Part One - Craft



Modern Topiary

I am a gardener who specialises in topiary. By topiary I mean any plant pruned to look good - in the eye of the beholder, anyway.

My exposure to pruning was through a summer job at 15, as a ground worker to tree surgeons. I then became a gardener, read the books and took the workshops of Jake Hobson at Niwaki, then got mentored by Charlotte Molesworth, the Queen of Topiary.

25 years later and somehow I'm still doing my summer job.

But I love the physical act of this work, to lose track of time as I make. I am outside, working with my hands - the craft - but also accessing something positive - exercising an artistic side through topiary. Through the physical nature of pruning, I have a conversation with myself, discover what makes me laugh.

This book is for people keen on plants, who think the garden could be improved with judicious pruning.

The core skills?

Proper technique, an understanding of composition options, the need for time in making topiary and the development of personal flair and inventiveness.

Topiary is a creative act. Plants grow, and the positive option is to balance a work between the craft and the art.

I hope this book helps the making of modern topiary.



Tools

Access to topiary is egalitarian because the necessary tools are minimal.

Shears.

Secateurs.

Hand clippers.

Keen, light tools make pruning a pleasure, so invest in good steel because it can hold a sharp edge.

Whetstone to maintain that edge. Oil to prevent the steel rusting.

Hedge trimmers are fine too, if you don't mind the noise.

String, not wire. Never wire, because it can cut into the bark and damage the plant.

Pruning saw.

Ladder.

Sheets to catch the arisings clipped.

For cleanliness, a bucket of water with a dash of bleach in, to dip tools into between plants. Or a diluted bleach mix in a spray bottle to spritz on the blades, then wipe off. This cleanliness should be habituated to prevent the spread of disease around the garden.

All that prevents topiary-making is a lack of time. Topiary does need time.

Imagination too.



Technique

Good technique is to hold shears higher up the handles, closer to the blades. Gives better control as you shape.

Keep one hand still. This guides you across the plant with accuracy.

Think like a machine. Clip across the facade of your hedge or shrub.

Be smooth. Miss a leaf? No matter. Go over again, still being smooth, economical with your movements.

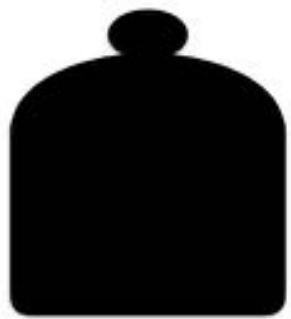
Don't hunt and peck. It's too random, wasteful...

Look down the plane to cut. Stand over the shape, or press your body into the plant if this puts you in the right position.

Shoulders are relaxed. Shears are sharp. There is little effort.

Cut over the shrub or hedge more than once.

The first draft removes the weight of plant material. Second tightens the clip. A third might be the difference between job done and beautiful job.



Plants

I choose my topiary plants with care.

Seek plants that sprout. If it has evolved to combat predation it will make a topiary because it grows back.

A small leaf allows more detail in the topiary design. A large leaf less nuance, more strength, power.

The leaf must reflect light. I loathe a leaf that steals the sunshine.

Investigate the leaf to discover what can be made.

Slow-growing plants are a gift. Plant a yew that takes seven years to reach the necessary height, but will be part of the landscape for centuries. Wave away those who fizzle out, sour.

Topiary can flower, berry, have thorns to provide birds with a place to roost. Wildlife benefits from trees, shrubs and hedges.

Embrace fragrance.

When a plant has some or all of these characteristics, plant and clip.



Boxwood

Boxwood is a classic topiary plant, offering everything I want - small, reflective leaf, slow-growth, fragrance, a home for birds, spiders, insects...

There are many beautiful varieties too:

Bowles Blue
Elegantissima
Langley Beauty
Rosmarinifolia
Myrtifolia

Seek them out. Investigate their habits.

In the UK, the traditional day to cut boxwood is Derby Day. But cut then, early June, it grows again. So twice the clipping each year.

I prefer to clip once later in the year, September to November. You won't disturb wildlife and it will remain sharp through to April.

Okay, push me? I prefer to clip when I have time to do it well. Boxwood rewards time spent with it.

If possible use sharp shears for a cleaner cut. Torn boxwood leaves turn brown at the serrated edge, makes the work look ill.

Boxwood caterpillars arrived to Europe from China in 2007. The caterpillars defoliate the plant. The only effective predator is the gardener.

From April, spray leaves with *Bacillus thuringiensis*, an organic spray. Or organically squash the caterpillars! Continue this treatment through each life cycle of this pest until the end of summer. Four times a year? Getting the timing right curbs plant damage.

Blight is a fungal disease that affects boxwood. Look for black streaks and lesions on the stems, leaves falling off the plants. Cut out these afflicted parts and burn or dispose of them.

You want air to circulate, so remove up to 150mm off the bottom of the plant to lift from the ground. Mulch underneath with composted bark, to trap any fungal spores from splashing upwards and causing reinfection.

In winter, thin inside the plants by snipping away 10% of the stems. This promotes leaf growth all the way down a branch, making the plant healthier, rather than producing leaves knitted together at the tips of the bush. Lets air and light in too.

Clean tools prevent blight spreading between plants.

Use low nitrogen feeds to improve overall health.

If boxwood seems too much effort, use an alternative:

Teucrium fruticans - offers nectar to bees. Has a... tousled habit.

Lonicera nitida - poor man's boxwood. Grows so fast needs clipping four times a year. Life is too short to be pruning the same plant so much. Same with Lonicera pileata.



Sarcococca - Christmas boxwood. Reflective leaf, scented flowers in winter.

Ilex crenata - a brittle weed, beloved by garden designers. Gets fussy in any condition you happen to plant it.

Euonymus 'Green Spire' - gets pruned low, on the horizontal, yet yearns to grow tall. I dislike a plant prisoned in such a way.

Yew - if using as a low parterre, let it be taller than the average parterre height. Beautiful when grown loftier.

Rosemary - good for a sun-brightened, warm spot.

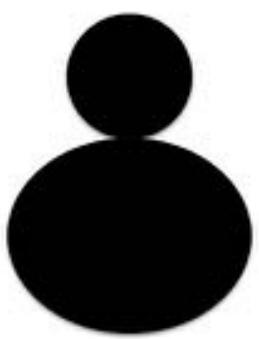
Lavender - an ever-silver. Indulged in by the honeybee.

But there is nothing like boxwood.

The future of this plant? Will be a reduction in its garden use, becoming a niche plant. Too many problems, too much effort. A shame.

My fight is for making the use of boxwood special. Revere the plant. Have just two or three in the garden, but craft them to be sculptural, extraordinary, fun, personal. Shape them the way only boxwood can be shaped.

Less, so easier to look after. Yet showing what boxwood can do.



Yew

Another classic plant for topiary. An evergreen British native.

Equable under the shears, formally shaped or figured. No trouble used in a modern garden against concrete or glass, or amidst water.

So flexible, new growth can be twisted and coiled, the stems easy to serpentine.

Leaf returns from brown wood. Perfect for renovation work. Just give the bare branches lots of sunlight.

Yew is condemned for being slow growing. But this is untrue with an established plant. Plant in your garden as soon as possible.

Other problems? Yew can dominate. After all, it wants to be a tree. So the growth emerging in late spring each year on settled plants must be kept slim. I overhaul and slim down many old yew topiaries buckled out of shape.

A hedge trimmer gives a crisp cut on yew hedges. Shears are for detailed work.

Keep fastigate 'Irish' yew slender, its habit informing how to barber - remove the weight!

Golden yew works with scarring and relief clipping on the facade.

Yew is a classic topiary plant with so much potential.



Deciduous

Deciduous plants are prepared for being predated, so they make great topiaries because they grow back. They settle well if planted bare-root, are affordable, grow fast and look comfortable in the landscape.

Instead of the classical choices of boxwood and yew I feel the future of topiary is the exploration of native, deciduous plants.

Easily pruned to size, so opening up possibilities for small gardens, try hawthorn or hornbeam, elm, oak, spindle, rowan, acer, birch...

Birch - autumn leaves the colour of lemon zest. The bark reflects sunlight... and the denuded branches in winter too, oh, drooping like spilt, cooling caramel...!

Hornbeam - warms a scene if placed alongside evergreens on a frosty day. Beech has a similar effect.

Hawthorn - suits doughnut shapes, rings narrowing as they travel upwards on a single, central stem. The more you clip, the denser the thorns knit together, to make a spiked crown of winter branches. Blossom in May. Haws in autumn. With a twist to the trunk, the bark a mottle of torn textures, hawthorn has three seasons of interest.

I am experimenting with Amelanchier, Magnolia, Cercidiphyllum (that scent!) and Liriodendron too.

Some deciduous plants volunteer class in their inherent shape.

Think of the Gingko, to distort its natural outline seemed a fun experiment... so I tried... failed.

I found I preferred its natural shape.

To deny nature, to actively dissolve the innate form, seems absurd - but the shock of seeing an iconic plant radically pruned is an effective gift to the viewer of a garden, a surprise to make them halt and take note.

Must be done well though, so I suggest - and would be thrilled if proved wrong - that deciduous topiaries should be grown in classical forms.

An organic blob of topiarised birch?

Too wackadoo. The mind needs an anchor in the familiar before embracing the odd.

So make a birch topiary with a straight central stem.

Create several 'doughnut' rings layered along this stem. Top off the topiary with a mop-head.

We identify this traditional shape, yet enjoy the surprise of birch.

Try a spiral shape... but out of hawthorn?

Much easier to accept when the contrast is a common shape made from an unusual plant.



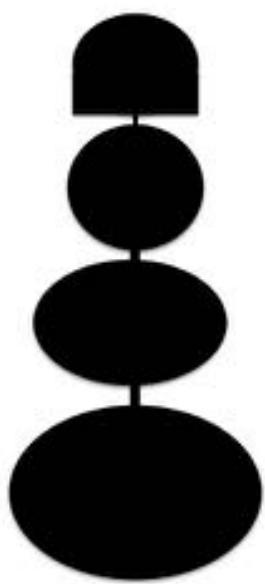
Transitions are an added design effect when using deciduous plants as topiaries.

Bare branches in winter transition to bud in spring... then to almost transparent leaf... then to blossom, autumn leaf colour... and gone.

Even those half transitions, the moments between bud and leaf, are a moment of note - sap is rising, spring is a galloping horse across the land!

In turn these transitions temper the light in your garden. Design to lace sunlight through shaped branches, or model the thorns of a hawthorn against the sky.

The future of topiary is deciduous plants.



Evergreens and Ever Silvers

The worst part of any garden book is when the author just lists plants. I don't want to read it, I don't want to write it.

But I understand, instead of exploring for themselves, people want to know the best plants to use. So here is a list of plants for topiary, grouped lethargically and without explanation, because I'm already bored of this page.

All are plants I have shaped at some time. Some turned out well, some... meh... but that may have been my pruning, rather than the plant.

Better, as I have said, to explore the plant. Investigate the leaf, scrutinise habits and character.

Plants with big leaves are often better for shade as they have more leaf surface to capture the dubious light. Small-leaved plants allow more detail in the topiary.

Nose around for fragrance.

Or faff less and use the plants already planted - clip these to create the happy accident that makes the garden.

A list of plants I have used then. Boring. Turn the page, or better - grab your shears, get outside and explore.

Arbutus

Bay

Camellia

Eleagnus

Escallonia

Hebe

Holly - leaf reflects light, which is why we sing about it at Christmas. The harder you cut the more it grows. Fantastic plant to hedge lay. Shears or even secateurs are faster than a hedge trimmer if pruning lightly.

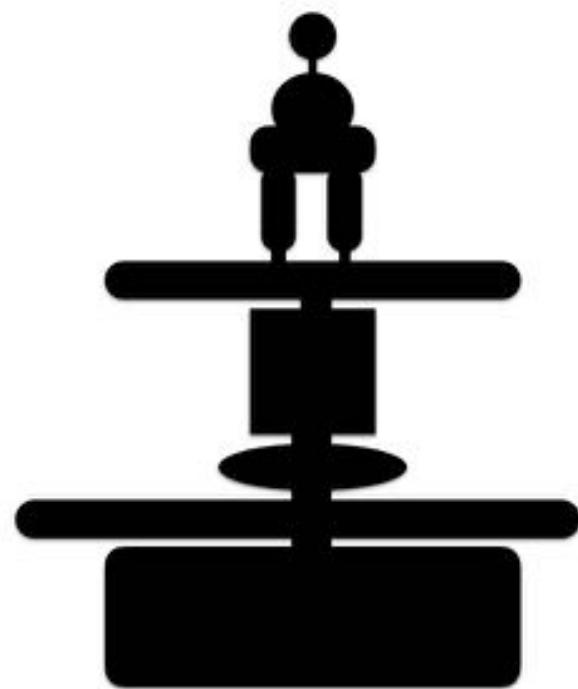
Lavender

Myrtle

Olive

Osmanthus

Phillyrea - sounds like a disease, but don't be put off. Leaf like an olive leaf. Tough as old boots, just give lots of sunshine. Though hard to propagate - making it expensive - I plant one in every garden I work in.



Pittosporum - although small-leaved, I find it works best in full, geometric shapes rather than for detailed figurative pieces.

Pyracantha - an anthem of berries and thorny roosting spots for birds.

Rhamnus

Rosemary - use this to plant up a warm spot.

Teucrium



When To Clip

Physically, clipping is hard work. I prefer to prune only once a year.

When is often a choice - are you happy to view the fluffy, luxurious growth of summer as the days shorten into autumn? To clip your hedges early September so that the redefined form stays this way all through winter?

I love this contraction, the movement generated from removing the shaggy growth to regain the defined form.

If you don't want a leaf out of place clip every week. Insanity resides this way - but hey! - follow insanity to a padded cell and the prohibition of accessing sharp blades. I'll be sat enjoying a gin and tonic, watching you (from a safe distance), all my pruning done in one intense go.

Not to cut is a choice too. Behold how leaving hedges unpruned through winter makes the garden feel. Makes you feel. This is the elasticity of topiary design.

For a direct pointer on when to prune, read on to the topiary calendar:

January/February... potentially into March/April

This is catch up time - now you have the chance to clip boxwood hedges well. Get on, do the work with care and enjoy the shapes of your labour.

I tend not to clip yew at this time of year, not because they will die but because they can brown off - more from a cold wind, I think.

To confuse things, I know gardeners who do the opposite - won't clip boxwood in the cold but clip yew all year round.

Gardening is nuanced and weird, but the lesson is to look. Look at what the garden needs and the climate is saying can be done... to look and then choose is an important skill for the gardener.

To renovate a topiary instead of replacing a plant shortcuts the time element needed for great topiary.

I do restoration work in the early months of the year, especially just after Valentine's Day. This is for practical reasons - restoration work requires the sort of hard pruning that exposes bare wood. Bare, dead-looking topiaries are normal when starting a new shape from an old plant, so by cutting late winter the brown stems are only seen for a month or two before sap rises and sunlight encourages the plant to leaf up.

Renovation work is a commitment.

Cut hard in the autumn and it is easy to panic looking at skeletal branches through a long winter, worry the plants have died. Never a need to dismay. Prune the right plant it grows back.

Fresh growth emerging after a renovation prune can be shaped by the autumn.



May To September

The pruning season – some love their hedges and topiary to look clipped and formal all year round, so they start clipping early, even as the plant grows.

I prefer once per year, from late August as then regrowth is minimal. Time-saver!

But choose – consider time, effort, nesting birds and the design of your green architecture. That will guide you on how often to cut during the growing season.

Plants from sunnier places than the UK - like myrtle, bay, carpenteria, pittosporum, rhamnus - I prefer to clip by the end of September.

October To December

Final pruning of yew in October. Everything else clipped too.

Get bare-root trees planted in the ground. Keep the grass away from the trunk and mulch with composted bark. You will have topiaries to work on in... 7 years?

Enjoy!



The Language of Topiary and the Skeleton Shapes

The language of topiary is fun. A shape vocabulary includes:

Blobs and Blobberries

Crinkle Crankles

Cheeseblocks, Slabs

Jellydrops, Beehives, Eggs

Mop-heads

Tumpties, Nipples

Mushrooms

Doughnuts

Balls, Domes, Spheres, Burns, Asses, Bumps, Lumps, Humps, Bells, Bolls, Twmps

Squares, Cubes, Rectangles, Boxes, Dice

Duos, Trios, Quads

Droids

Onions, Teardrops, Minarets

Obelisks, Puddings, Kidneys, Carbuncles

Standards, Lollipops, Bosquets

Cones

Spirals

Goblets, Top Hats, Parasols, Parachutes, Umbrellas, Furniture

Figures... Chess Piece, Soldier, Peacock, Pheasant, Fox, Horse, Dog (with kennel), Chicken (in hen house), Loch Ness Monster!

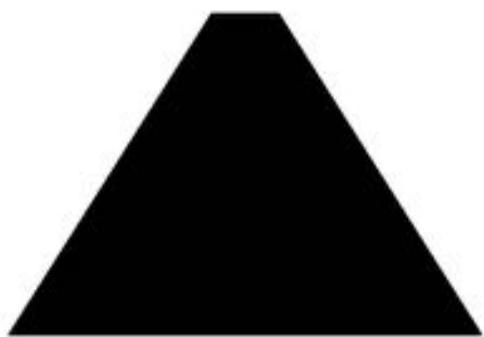
Double-Hedge... Triple-Hedge

Buttress

Crenellation (this is the space between two merlons in a battlement wall... merlons? The upright bit in a castle fort an archer peered through to fire arrows).

Windows, Scallops, Niches, Tunnels

Clouds, Pom-poms, Broccoli, Candelabra



But all shapes, every single shape ever made, begins with a ball or a cone. The ball and cone are the skeleton shapes.

Riff around these standards, design outwards from them - from a cone you can configure a haystack, spiral, chimney, vase, wedding cakes, columns, pyramids, candles...

The top of any cone can be sheared off flat - truncated! - a favourite formal shape of mine.

A ball makes an onion, a cushion, a button, a blob, a face, a bird...

To make a bird take a ball and remove the middle. Courage is needed to remove so much plant material - chop - make the cut.

For an arch, use string to tie the top of two cones together.

For a dog (or a bear, or a moose, or an elephant) make an arch (or a couple of arches) to create the legs, then start shaping a head and tail from the regrowth.

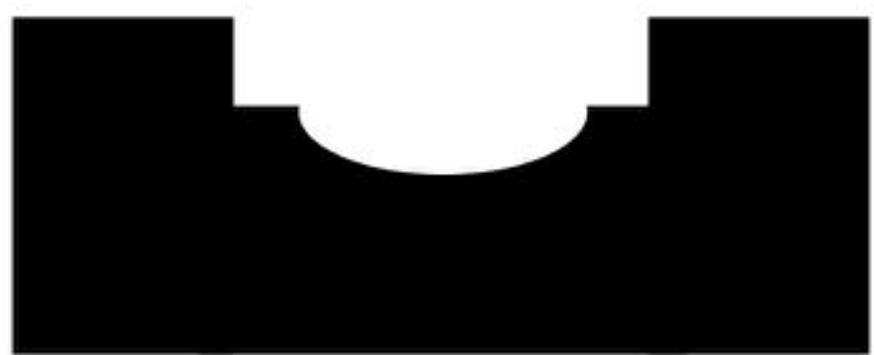
Any complex design begins by simplifying to the main shapes, breaking down the form the way a child draws a house (square, with a triangle for a roof), or a tree (a rectangle for the trunk, cloud for the leafy crown), or the sun (a circle).

Working from this basis, these skeleton shapes, let the handbrake off and go wild, place different shapes together, invert plinths, twist stems for the extra detail...

Refuse a frame. A frame will restrict! Especially years down the line, when wanting to reinvent the shape again, the frame is in the way - aaah! - that same stupid shape remains, but life has changed!

Remember though, this golden rule, in the madness of joy and creation - a simple shape clipped well does the smartest job.

And every shape begins from a ball or a cone.



Hedges

A hedge is a boundary - a living, mutable barrier to confine animals.

For modern topiary, think of hedges as valuable green architecture - to guide people in a particular direction, to shape an experience, create a different atmosphere, affect the landscape.

Chew over the style of hedge from choice of leaf to when and how it is cut, how this can change the way people act and reflect in a garden.

Some terms:

Facade

The face of the hedge. Front, back and sides. The bit that isn't the top.

Batter

Sloped side on a hedge, where the bottom is wider than the top. This allows light to reach the whole of the hedge, so it will grow fuller.

Formal

A straight hedge, tightly clipped with sharp, squared edges.

Serpentine

A hedge snaking along the garden with flow and movement, curving side to side.

Try using a hedge to focus the narrative.

If a neighbour has a cherry tree, or a magnolia, and you want to borrow the view of the blossom, perhaps shape your hedge with a crenellation, a window or a curve to allow a view to this arrival of spring.

Arches make a difference too. Joining up two hedges to create an arch marks a change of space in the garden, but also has a physical effect on people as they move from sunlight to shade... then back into the light.

See how narrow a hedge can be clipped. Narrowness makes it tactile.

Use a hedge as a framework for flowers.

I have seen an oak tree with a clematis growing through, making a flowering clematis tree! Prime three different white clematis over a dense green yew hedge, so each separate flower zings against the leaf.

Use a hedge to mask volumes. A blank wall on the facade of a house can be broken up and improved by planting a hedge that smudges the view of all that brick.

Use reliefs on a hedge that looks drunk down its length - columns or pillars reset expectations, break up the long vista that never looks formal and 'right'. Reliefs prevent the eye judging for perfection (and its inevitable failure.)



Finials and finials on plinths can be grown on top of a hedge. These add rhythm, drawing the eye along.

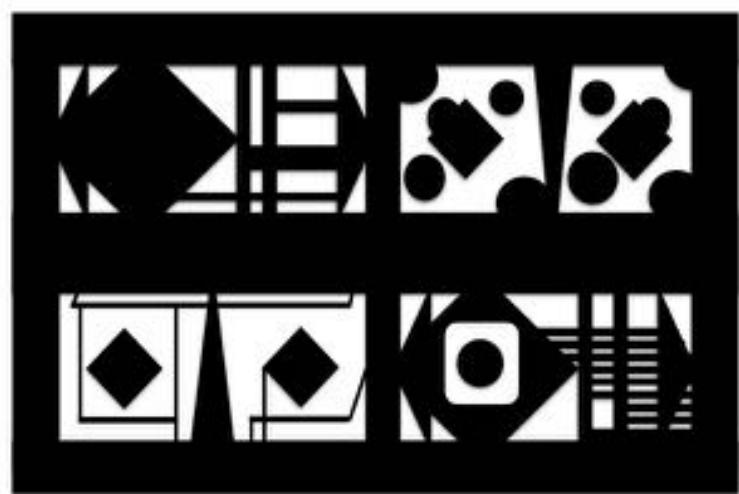
Depending on the chosen forms, they can change a hedge into something more formal. Or fun. So can figures - of birds, or dogs, or whatever the imagination dreams of.

To make figures and finials, leave the stems on top of the hedge uncut where you want the new shape to be. In a few years this unpruned growth sprouting from the top of the hedge can be shaped.

Get bored or get the shape wrong, just lop it off!

After planting a new hedge, I nip a minute piece off the end of each leaf, all over the facades, to promote density in the leaf material. I want new leaves to break from those cut points, so the hedge thickens quicker.

I'll do this twice through a growing season... if I have time.



Parterres

A parterre is a low hedge designed in a formal manner.

A knot garden is a low hedge with a pattern made to look, especially when viewed from above, like the hedge has been *knotted*.

Both are resource heavy. To clip either well is back-breaking work because the hedge is so low. No topiary artist would ever design a parterre... they must cut themselves.

For me, a parterre design must have the correct proportions for the space, and be meaningful to the garden - a heart shape if you believe in love, or maybe a sausage dog if that is what you own. Then the pattern becomes interesting.

My favourite parterre to clip is a Sanskrit symbol for peace patterned in boxwood, then mirrored, to double the volume of hedge to clip and clear up. The scale is impressive, but so is the choice of shape, the soft roll of the hedge's curves.

I want luxurious, soft, joyful, a feeling of abundance in the garden. A parterre too low or narrow makes the plants look caged, unhappy, like battery-farmed poultry. If you don't have room for abundance, don't have a parterre.

For me, a modern parterre is designed and then reduced, only partially planted and grown, a suggestion of what should be there.

Our imagination will fill in the gaps.

In summer the spaces in the hedge can be filled with flowering plants, so when those blooms disappear for winter you are left with this ghost shape, like a shipwreck dredged off the ocean floor for display. Or a game of Tetris, badly played.

These gaps reduce the physical work needed to maintain the parterre, echo the historical past and increase the work of the imagination.

A parterre, as any topiary, is a palimpsest - a form of an earlier form relating to the space.

Lean into this nature to make a modern parterre.



Part Two - Art



Topiary Composition

Topiary is a four-dimensional practise. Time is a necessity for shape, density of leaf, and for character and detail to emerge. Be patient. Commit to the process.

Context is key too. A topiary can be improved by recognising the need for its position in the garden, for why it is being pruned at all.

The texture and quality of the cut affects the composition. A simple shape clipped well is tactile as well as visual...

Steer clear of the *masculine* shape on the opposite page. Try for something less... erect. Although if this shape is everything you ever wanted and more in the garden... follow your weirdness.

Or be looser, don't set the design. Get drunk and clip. Allow plants to grow, to surprise. Trust in happy accidents, the subconscious, the process of time plus materials plus natural chaos.

Personality is infused in pruning. The shapes chosen and the way they are created present something of the person. This happens naturally, by choices taken when clipping. The emergent shape and style is the vulnerability of an aspect of yourself.

And we have many aspects, often deceitful.

You may yearn for a horizontal, square hedge, well-tended and refined, a composition of order... yet the shapes you make may be a monument to your neediness and a plea for attention. Fail to recognise the dishonesty and the garden won't thrive.

Recede from the manners friends and family expect, to shape the shapes you want to make. The growth of the plant may not match your dreams, but make the attempt!

I wonder why I compose the topiaries I do.

I love the work of Henk Gerritsen, his aim to make a wilderness out of the garden thrills me... I also love the minimalist aesthetic of Fernando Caruncho, each speck of garden gardened, controlled, the hedges cut so barely a leaf out of place, the seasons celebrated by moments of flowers given the evergreen stage to bloom.

Both have a strong philosophy, underpin their work with a green architecture. Studying these oppositional masters improved my own garden design work.

I doodle weird shapes that may be impossible to create with plants. I physically climb plants, twist branches, make half-cuts through stems to allow greater flex... sometimes it works, often doesn't... but I seek trouble and clumsiness to break the habits and limits of previous work.

Forage for a surprise, to be struck and so to respond.

Topiary shapes are composed and recomposed. The garden acquires singularity.

Compose topiary to find your own vernacular.



Waisting

Aim to make an hourglass figure.

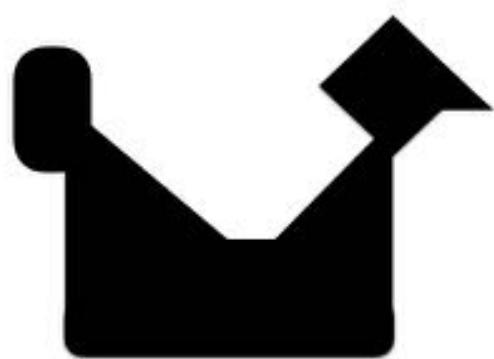
Start with a cone, take a pruning implement and choose a point to cut into the sides. To 'waist' the cone.

When finished with the cutting, leave alone. For a year, perhaps?

When you return, the piece now has a definite bottom, a definite top. Two distinct parts, and a definite piece missing in the middle, a 'waist'.

Next job is to shape the two separate parts in an interesting way. The bottom could be a plinth, the top, divided by the 'waist', a figure?

'Waisting' becomes real fun when differing the depth of the waist you make, or by playing with the height, or even the number... why stop at an hourglass?



Figurative

The history of topiary shapes is littered with figures - hens, geese, chickens, ducks, peacocks. The poultry were often provided a topiary dog to protect them, the dog often provided a kennel!

I've seen bears, lions, elephants, dragons, sea beasts and a Gruffalo. Made caterpillars, squirrels, moorhens, dancing people, mushrooms, kettles, trains, wine glasses, whales and a Loch Ness Monster... everything in the animal kingdom and beyond is up for grabs.

Unicorn, anyone?

Birds lend themselves well to figurative topiary because they start from a ball.

Just take the ball, cut out the middle, and you are left with two opposing ends. One is now the head, the other a tail.

No frame needed.

Character and detail will emerge in the future as the plant gets denser, but the basic shape is garnered from one confident cut.

Each year as the character develops, the attitude of your piece changes - clipping a broader chest, a craning neck, a punky top knot - perhaps even a quizzical head tilt?

Figures with legs are made using cones. Want a dog? Plant the cones apart, then pull the top of each cone together and tie with string. Joining the tips of these plants together creates an arch (so that is how you make an arch!) but this also creates legs and a body.

Allow the growth above where you have tied the plants to be shaped into the figure you want.

I am often asked to make an Alice in Wonderland style figure. In some gardens, Alice in Wonderland inspired shapes make brilliant topiary. But I never did like Alice or the Queen of Hearts, so I ask - can we imagine nothing beyond an Edwardian idea of whimsy?

Why such meagre cultural vitamins?

A student made a Golden Snitch from Harry Potter. What about a topiary wind turbine - a modern green giant? Do Married At First Sight or Eastenders incite the picking up of shears? Can a shaped boxwood satirise a politician?

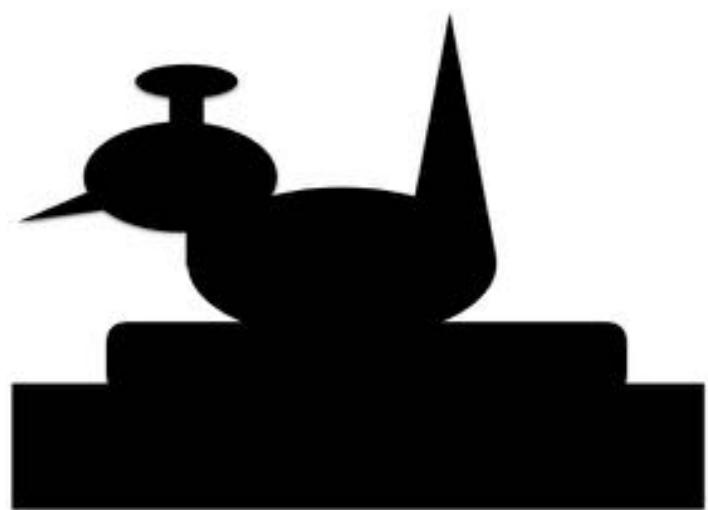
Modern figurative pieces should reflect the life around us.

The news reports humans displaced by rising seas. So instead of a boxwood chicken, use thinned out Gingko, a non-native, to create figures emerging from a pond.

Figurative topiary is strange - a description of, but not. A plant shaped to be the thing, when not the thing.

Almost the equivalent of reality television - reported as if real, though made, narrated, shaped to grab attention...

My preference is that figurative pieces have presence, rather than likeness. An intensity, weight, a bearing.



Explore The Plinth

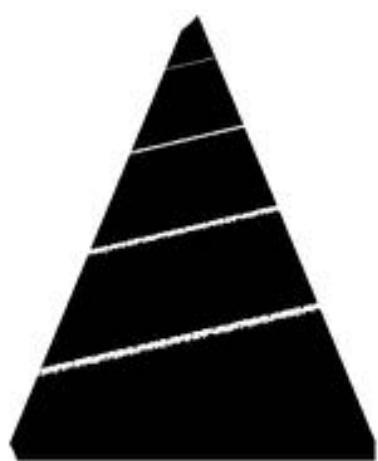
There are advantages to applying a topiary to a plinth.

A plinth offers context.

Says - *look at this.*

Placed here, this is a thing of importance. Of such importance it sits on a dais.

Look at this.



Formal Pruning

Formal topiary is straight lines, sharp, square edges, heavy, measured widths of hedge. Everything is crenellations, cubes, plinths, tiers and finials.

The plant is levelled with string lines. Maintenance is crisp. Shapes will be repeated. The narrative is no leaf out of place.

I like formal topiary placed to thumbprint a human hand on wild, exposed earth. An element of control in contrast to the epic elements of nature.

Do I use rulers, frames, templates or a string line to clip formal topiary?

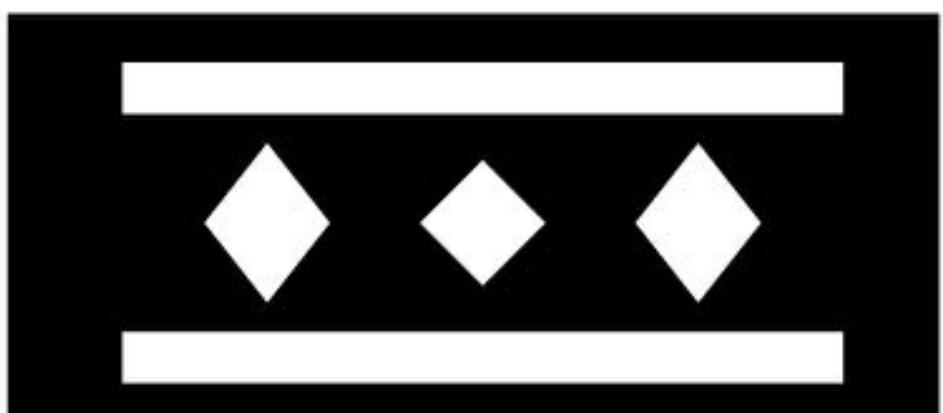
No.

A tape measure, sometimes, to give me the gist of where to prune.

I work by my own internal plumb-line. Place no trust in the ground being level. Check by eye from each angle to be sure the topiary is correct.

Formal topiary cannot be done subtly. Go all in, straight and sharp, everything level, clipped to the widths that work... if you won't set these standards, don't even bother.

For me, life is too short to quest for perfection and control over a hedge. Order a vodka martini and be grateful there is any topiary at all.



Relief. Scarring.

I design topiaries with both relief work and scarring.

Relief pruning is about leaving parts of the fresh, fluffy growth on the facade of a hedge uncut, often to a designed shape. This could be a column, or diamond, or letter of the alphabet, or a phrase like 'Happy Birthday'.

Design what you want, but picture the uncut growth as if a stamp on the hedge.

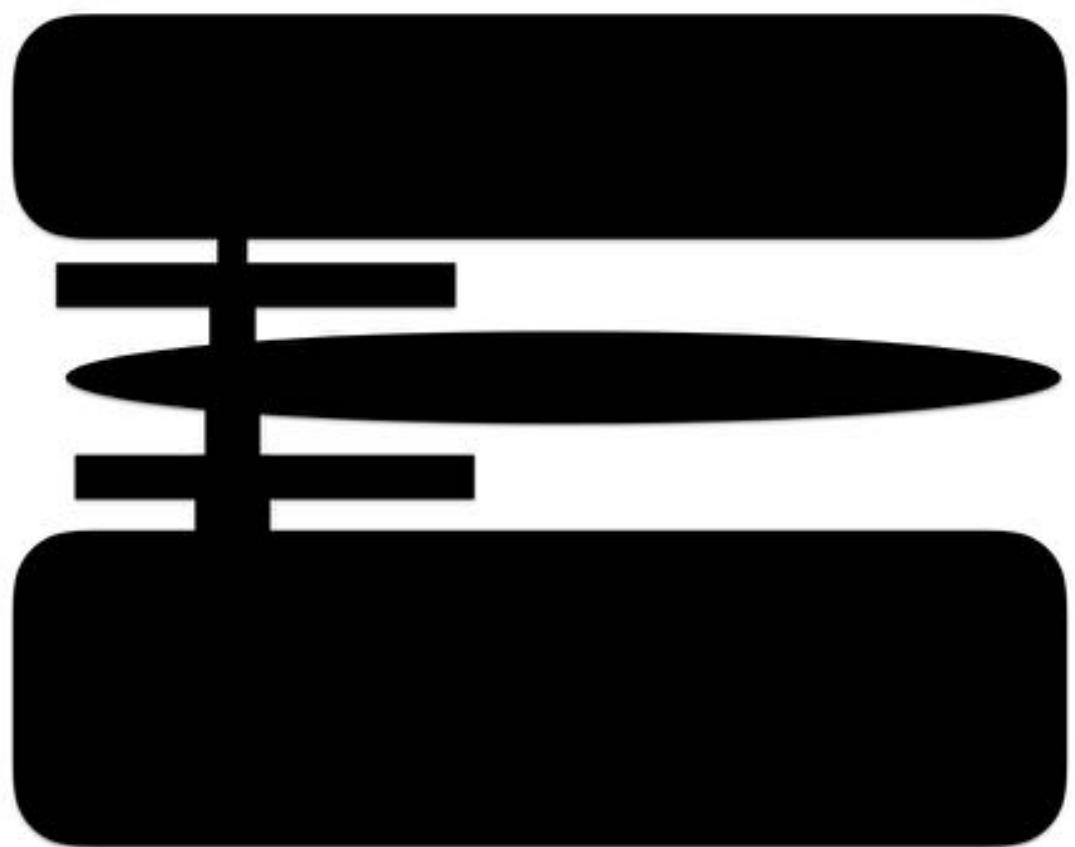
Scarring is pruning deeper cuts into the facade of the hedge. Yes, this will likely create a section that looks brown at first. Dead even. But use this technique on a happily-growing hedge or topiary and it will soon leaf up again.

By leaving foliage for relief work and making scarring cuts, I create three distinct layers in the topiary when I return to clip a year later.

First, a scar, giving shadow and depth. Then a facade to be clipped as normal. Finally, a relief of buoyant growth, to bounce sunlight around in contrast to the shade created by the scar. Three levels of clipping on the same plant offers three separate textures too.

Golden yew is perfect for this work because it offers green, gold and yellow leaves.

Develop unique topiaries within just a season or two using the techniques of relief and scarring.



Try Balance, Not Symmetry

Often I see, say, a lollipop topiary by a gate. With the same, the very same shape, the far side of the gate.

Symmetrical topiary is unnecessary, fussy, trumpets the ego of the pruner, the battle of will over nature. People who want symmetry love power - think dictator, threatening nuclear.

You might like symmetry, are no dictator. True, but something in you needs control, right? An on-top-of-my-life-Timothy?

If symmetry thrills, go big. Be who you are.

I don't want my topiaries to draw attention to themselves. They should root the garden in the space and occasionally, when the sunlight is just right, bounce a frying pan to the forehead with their *stop everything else you are doing right now and look* beauty...

I want topiary balanced, not symmetrical.

I would have topiary each side of a gate, but I would seek different shapes - a lollipop one side, three blobs the other? Or perhaps a wonky spiral of yew, then a fig grown for scented foliage, branches pinned back to the wall and fanned out to present the bark.

Evergreen solidity one side balanced by the strength of the fig on the other.

Whatever the shapes, balance the scales of vegetative mass. Which is an ugly phrase, but a concise way to say - place a similar amount of leaf on each side of a gate or door to create a balance of foliage, rather than aim for symmetry.

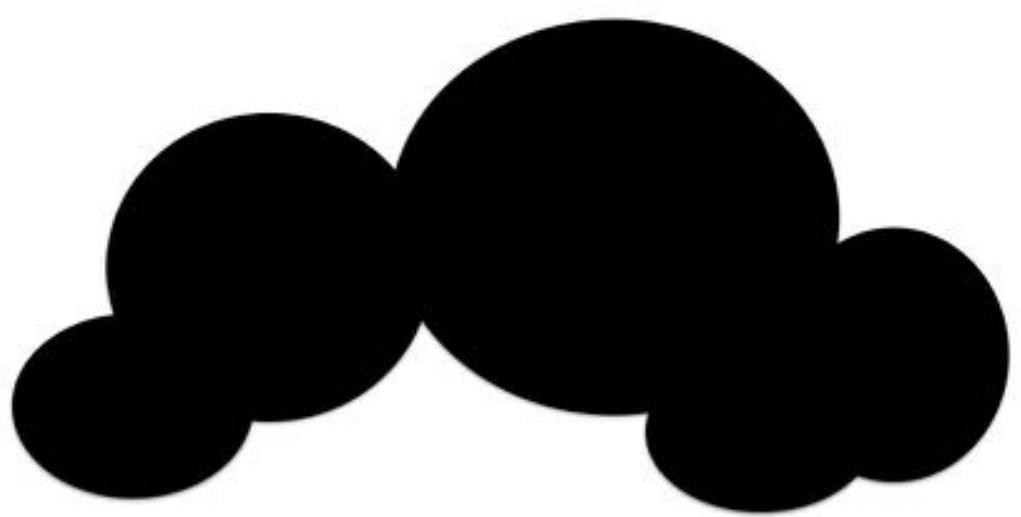
If you don't like the idea of balance, think of topiary as being in conversation. To place topiary in conversation means creating a reality where one involves or affects another.

Think major and minor, having a conversation that can be fun, loud, clunky, tenuous... but having a relationship. Symmetrical topiary holds boring conversations.

Clipping them is tough too - conditions are different for each plant, so one may grow faster than the other, or fail to grow at all one side.

Balance bypasses this issue for parity not uniformity. Standards are not lower - the game is different.

The future is for those who bring humanity to their work. Seek balance, not symmetry or standardised perfection.



Organic Topiary

The nature of the terrier is to react to the squeak of a rat. Predisposed to this hunt, the chase impulse can be diminished but it won't be removed. They will be who they are, so acceptance is key.

The same with organic topiary - allow the plant to be the shape it suggests.

This requires observation. Look hard, then dance on the narrow ledge between what you want the plant to be and what the plant tells you it has the potential to become.

Pull back branches, step within stems, test the bend and strength in each lateral limb. Discover the character of the plant.

Resistance yields the discovery of a new composition, so use the friction of any abnormalities to kickstart a design solution.

Boxwood caterpillar eaten some boxwood leaves? Cut away the defoliated and shape the left behind.

Plant doesn't grow straight?

Own the wonky as if a super strength and accentuate the supposed flaw.

Organic topiary can't be taught - observe the plant, be empathetic to the positive and the negative, make a pruning choice, then clip to conceive the uniqueness.



Made 'Of The Moment'

Years ago I clipped three large, adjacent box balls into soft, amorphic blobs. Looked like one giant topiary, all cushioned and soft.

I knew I was to make something soft because I was soft in the making, a temperate carving with the gift of boxwood leaves, which assent so well to a doughy shape. Made by hand, in the moment, following eye, inspiration and flow.

These box balls were clipped again during the pandemic, post UK lockdown. Again, shaped in and of the moment.

On stepping back I saw not the soft blobs I expected but solid, angular planes. Fists clenched in frustration. Bitter work.

A representation of the moment.

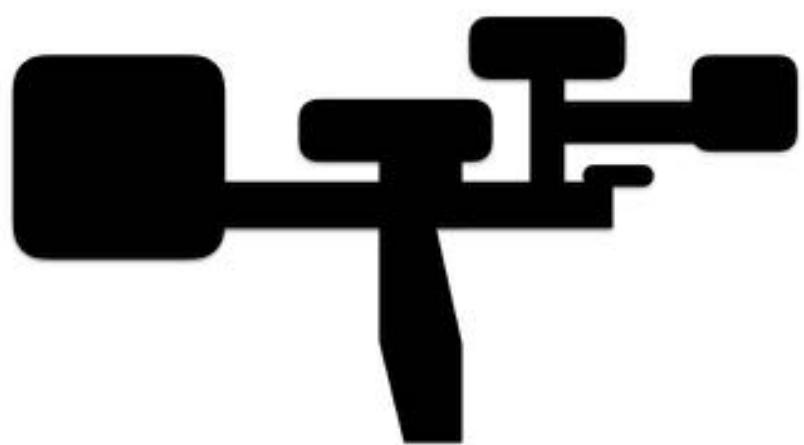
I smile a lot, so was shocked at what I made, didn't realise how I felt. I did not even notice as I made them.

This happens when topiary is of the moment. There is no definitive end design, just a trust something will be discovered. Shape generated by proposing chaos.

The technique is an improvisation, to follow the plant, make fast decisions, tap into joy or despair or whatever feeling abounds. This requires boldness, not timidity, to breach beyond the performative self in seeking the ineffable...

Keeps the garden exciting when conceding the composition will change each year.

And my boxwood blobs are again less shanked, more optimistic.



Abstraction Fragmentation

To abstract or fragment a topiary is fun.

A figurative piece must be a likeness - a duck is a duck, whatever pose or attitude she holds - but an abstracted duck is reality on the slant.

Think disembodiment, not invention. Essence over resemblance.

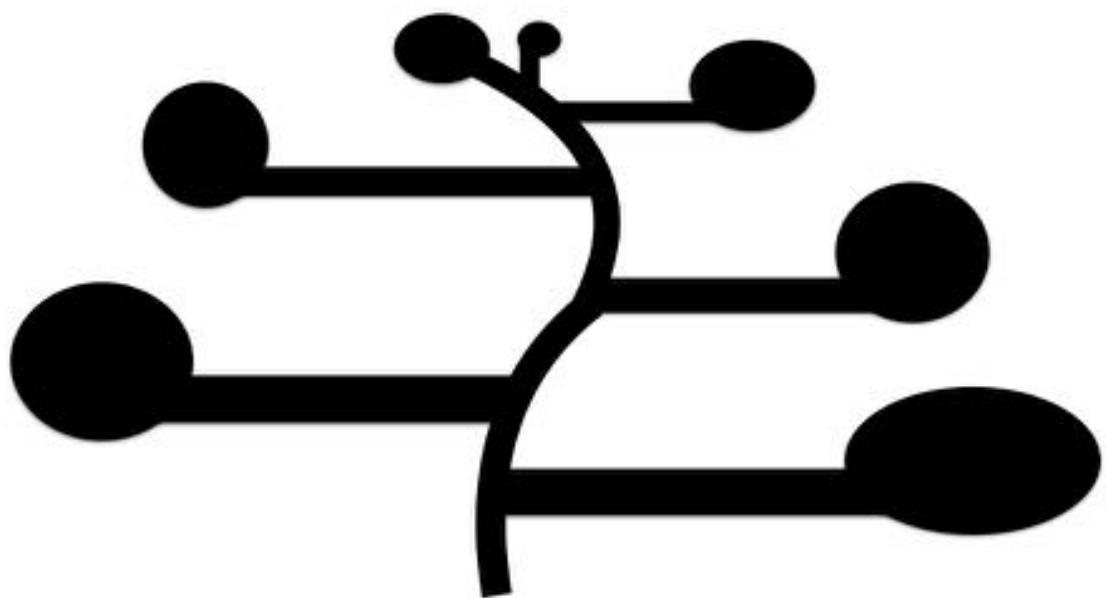
To abstract, take a truth everyone knows and twist, to see the same idea anew.

Fragmentation is the same. Blow up a singular shape.

But don't get hung up on weird designs. There is bliss in a simple shape well clipped, rather than bizarre for the sake of bizarre.

Abstracting a topiary makes the garden unique.

Who else could abstract a plant the way you can?



Cloud Pruning

Cloud pruning is a search for the shape you want whilst in attendance to what the plant could be. As so much plant material is removed with this technique, a mundane shrub is often reinvented.

A cloud pruned tree uses the branches as a frame to showcase the clouds. The clouds refer to the shapes made by the groups of clipped leaves at the ends of the stems.

Use this approach to stream more light into a garden, parade an interesting bark or compelling trunk, or just to update a tired plant.

To begin, get into the plant and survey what is there. Take your time, note the branch anatomy - preference is for a single stem, but a shrub with multi-stems or a complex branching can also be used. It just provides a different feel and look. A wonky single stem gives the piece extra character, so use this 'flaw' as an advantage.

I pursue branches in scale, that balance each other.

So remove the undesirable stems and leaves, leaving some leaf on the tip of each kept branch to make the clouds.

Use string to bend branches into better places if necessary.

Need a percentage to help gauge how much wood to clear? Maybe 70% of branches... a huge amount of material. Often, when you start, this feels too much. Fight that feeling. Get rid of branch and leaf.

When surrounded by risings, go make a cup of tea for fortification and return. The likelihood is the plant needs more removing. Fresh eyes maintain the courage to cut.

As you work, ask:

How many clouds?

What shape are the clouds?

What size?

Do the clouds touch each other?

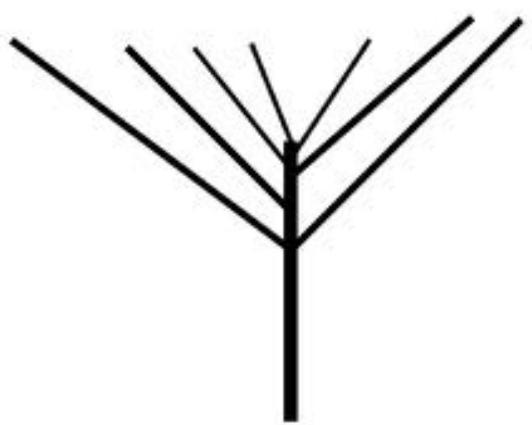
Do they get narrower near the top of the plant?

When the structure is discovered, begin to make the clouds, balls, mushrooms or discs you chose.

Ball-shaped clouds feel old-fashioned to me. Balls get less light too, so can look thin at the bottom.

To look modern try mushroom caps, or shallow discs. These have flat bottoms, so negate the problem of lack of light. But choose what you like.

Return a year later to see how the plant reacted. Prune again, with structure in place and now far less to erase.



Natural or Transparent Pruning

Is as if nature has formed the plant this way. Takes skill and sensitivity in the act of pruning, shelves the ego and places the plant and the garden narrative first.

Aspire to open and airy within the branch structure, as though stems are lace. Stops a garden feeling claustrophobic, overgrown with a density of mature hedges and shrubs. Starts sunlight flooding through.

Secateurs will be needed to remove or even halve leaves. Possibly a saw to remove whole branches.

Use this technique on camellia because you can assess the position of flower buds so they remain untouched, but also contour light to reflect off the waxy leaf.

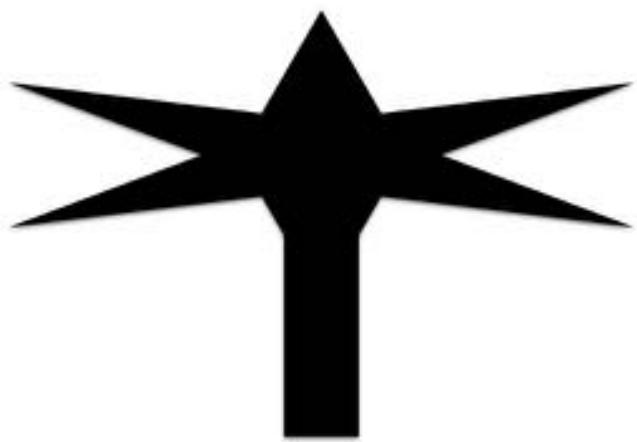
Pine too - shape as if the wind has worked to declutter her.

With boxwood I seek a form of clipping balanced between the tightly pruned, traditional English formal garden style and the hand snipped looseness of the US style.

In part I want the tactility, in part to prevent the tightly knitted leaf growth that can cause box blight after a few years of formal pruning, when air can no longer circulate through the density of leaf on the plant.

So far my experiments in this mixture of styles have been failures, my additions and subtractions of leaf and branch too obvious.

Natural, or transparent pruning, keeps the hand of the gardener in their pocket, superfluous to the agile plant as star attraction.



Cow-Browsed

If struggling for inspiration, then a filthy easy trick...

Take a pruning saw to a shrub in the garden, removing the lowest branches to show off the legs, as if the plant has been eaten by cows or deer.

Raising the canopy immediately makes the untouched top look architectural. This is because of the contrast between leafy crown and clean stem.

To cow-browse also allows light into the garden.

In turn contrasting plants can be grown below the canopy.

Even failing to touch the top, by exposing the legs you improve a plant and permit change to happen below.

A cheat code technique if stressed by composing or creating, yet perfectly reasonable action to take to look like a topiary genius.

I

Context

To place a topiary needs thought.

More thought than the hip-high, squared-off cubes of shrubs clipped in car parks around Britain. Supermarket car park topiary. Careless shapes from get-the-job-done Gary.

Discerning topiary has a right to be where it is.

The gardener Henk Gerritsen had topiary chickens in boxwood, planted where the chicken run was pre-fox dinner. *Context*. Dark humour, yes, but *context*.

Place a myrtle topiary by a compost toilet. Brush against the leaf, earn the fragrance. If you are a sculptor, have plant sculptures in the garden.

Live in a flat landscape with wide empty skies? Perhaps topiaries are low horizontals to mimic the landscape? Or maybe better to send the eyes upwards with cone shapes, to puncture the firmament, forms in conversation with those yawning skies?

If landscape beyond the garden dominates, feasibly I would design austere, formal topiary to anchor the garden with the influence of 'man'.

The context is the life led.

Liminal spaces are good places for topiary. Strength and structure to punctuate those in between spots.

Waymark a door or gate with a topiary, or use a clipped hedge as guide to move people around a garden. Hedges help wildlife and can morph if context changes. Bricks and fences don't change with the times.

I dislike clipped plants used for no reason, as if to complete a collection or to fulfil the fantasy of a misplaced tradition.

Topiary needs context. Or plant something else.



Contrast

Sometimes a topiary doesn't need to be better. Improvement comes from the contrast of what is placed around the shape.

Dark green yew clipped for winter, in conversation with a drop of golden yew beyond. Or beech topiary, with its burnt orange leaf, to counter the same dark scene and add warmth.

Or flush green boxwood topiary against white stones.

The contrast can be a wavy, breezy meadow planting, amplified by heavyweight evergreens planted within.

An acer, leaves like lace and sparkling in autumn sunlight, reflected against clear running water.

Perhaps repeat the same clipped shape around the garden - short, square hedges that imitate the solid, rectangular brick of the house - then break this rhythm with spirals.

Create divergence by using the same shape but with different plants.

I often compose a topiary shape based on how the light and shade change as the sun filters around the garden during the day. The way light reflects off leaves or deepens a shadow creates distinct contrasts, offering textural excitement.

Contrast colours, leaves, shapes, movement, materials, weight of plant to improve a topiary.

Observe and seek enhancements even after the shape is decided.

T

Sunlight

Sunlight adds texture and movement to topiary.

A shape no-one noticed in the garden at noon spellbinds at dusk.

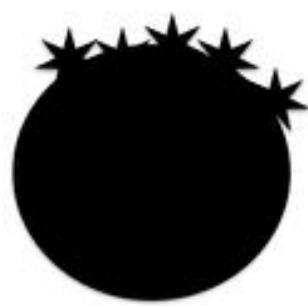
How does sunlight enter the garden, how do leaves reflect the sunlight, how can pruning maximise the effect as the sunlight changes through the day?

As you think about sunlight think about shadows.

Place hornbeam in a morning sunbeam in spring, as the green bud of its leaves is about to surge, so the light shimmies through the framework of dark branches to create a drop of shadow on the far side...

Clip the skirt beneath a heavy topiary to create a drop of shadow, as if the plant floats above the ground. Works well with topiaries above hard landscaping.

Use sunlight and shadow as an element of design.

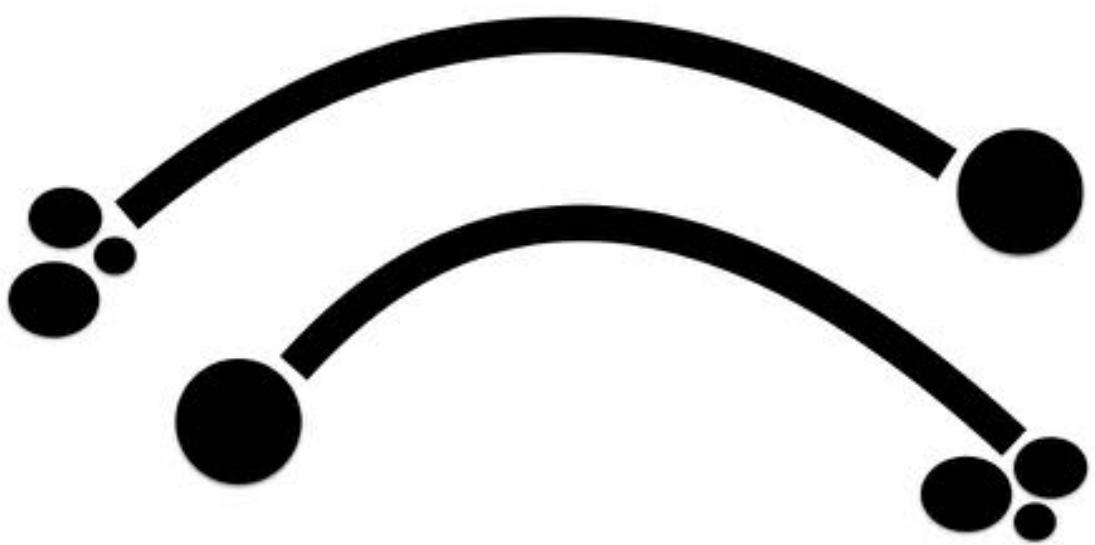


Tactility

We think of topiary as a visual craft, a scene-setter for the eye to devour.

But topiary affects more than just one sense - a well-clipped hedge demands a hand to brush against the leaf, note its weight, enjoy its wibble....

Clip so well, touch becomes a response to the garden.



Stillness

Be aware of how pruned plants sustain stillness in a space. Contrast this stillness by clipping for dynamism, shaping hedges to connote rhythm.

Perhaps use a low, serpentine hedge to lick along the side of a path and lure the eye down the garden. The shape is modest, hardly blasphemous. But when clipped well is inviting.

From stillness there is also elasticity in topiary, adding life to the garden. Elasticity is keenest at the end of summer when the flush of a season's growth is cut away, to bring the topiary back into shape, to order, to sit quiet through the winter.

This contraction forms a narrative - abundant, shaggy, unkempt, wild, luxuriant even... then brought back to shape tended.

Use the elasticity of topiary as a positive force, a looping story of growth and calm, a counter to the stationary nature of evergreen hedges.

The contrast of movement to stillness is part of the topiary toolbox.



Lightness

I like density to my hedges and shrubs, but lightness in how they hold themselves in the garden.

A topiary of grace, where heaviness has lightness as a contrast.

This lightness is about being open and measured, composed wherever the feet are placed.

Cow-browse a ponderous yew, thin internal branches of an acer, take away all downward facing twigs on a crab apple, place dainty grasses beneath a delicate cherry in blossom. These are examples of a lightening... but lightness in topiary is a textural idea.

Think of topiary as a tip-toe across the garden, a shrug of the shoulders to the sky...

A hollow-boned flight to celestial heights.

The garden as proposal to calmness, to be without burden.



Conclusion

This book is the one I wanted when I started - a handbook of techniques and ideas to remind me to set a high standard of work, to explore forms and define what I think can be made.

I hope the book improves your efforts, helps you see with precision and turns what you want into a reality.

I believe modern topiary will use native, deciduous plants, planted bare-root in the autumn to circumvent costs and the application of water resources.

Shapes will be relevant, not twee.

Design won't be on paper but worked on-site.

Hedges will be used as green architecture, to create a space for people and wildlife.

Topiaries will create shade from a too hot sun.

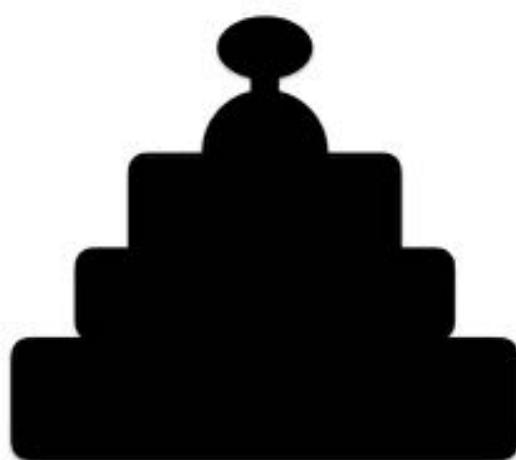
Mulches will be shovelled on to sequester carbon.

Clipped plants will be in contrast to the meadows that surround them.

Minimal tools, uncomplicated technique, straightforward skeleton shapes to design from... some plants and time. This is all topiary artists need.

Talent is not the key - determination, technique, observation and commitment are. Keep these tenets in mind as an anchor for your topiary compositions. Let personality be seen in the pruning.

Grab a pair of shears and go make some modern topiary.



Further Reading

Tools I Use:

Okatsune 21" shears
Okatsune secateurs
Tobisho Barracuda hand clippers
Silky hand saw
Stihl electric hedge trimmers
Tripod ladder

Try:

The European Boxwood and Topiary Society, where I teach with Chris Poole, who is an authority on boxwood and has taught me vast amounts about this wonderful plant.

Niwaki for tools and tripod ladders. Jake Hobson's book 'The Art Of Creative Pruning' opened my eyes to modern topiary.

Charlotte Molesworth and her garden Balmoral Cottage. She is the Queen of Topiary, generous in sharing her knowledge and the garden is an extraordinary space.

Many thanks to Philip Thorne for editing the book. He makes The Amelia Project, a dark comedy podcast about an agency who fake clients' deaths, then bring them back with a new identity.

Finally, thanks to Chloe for the encouragement to share these ideas, and Buxus the Norfolk Terrier for half-listening (which is the most you can expect from a Norfolk Terrier) to my chapter ideas on our walks.

This is the topiary book I wish I had when I began trying to clip plants into a shape others would consider beautiful.

Split into two parts - the craft and then the art of topiary - I have tried to share everything I know.

It's not a long book.

I hope this gives you the foundation for good technique, alongside ideas on how plants can be developed into full designs.

Darren Lerigo is a gardener who specialises in topiary and pruning.