



## **Topiary Provocation, Autumn 2021**

### **What Is The Topiary Provocation?**

My name is Darren. I'm a gardener who specialises in topiary and pruning and I'm interested in how to use topiary in a modern garden.

I invited a number of keen gardeners and designers to a meeting via Zoom in Autumn of 2021 and presented a set of 'provocations' - some daft, some honest, all lacking nuance and designed, like a headline in the Daily Mail, to 'provoke'...

... in the hope it would inspire people to see topiary from a different angle.

After hearing the provocations the topiary enthusiasts were asked to feedback on what had got them most thrilled, excited, or even angry.

I have collated below the common themes that came up in the discussion.

Read on to find out where modern topiary may well be going...

### **The 11 Provocations**

- Native, Deciduous Trees Make Great Topiary (Because You Get Transitions)
- Unusual Topiary Plants Need Classic Shapes
- Plant Availability Changes The Landscape
- To Design Topiary, Seek Friction
- Topiary Is A Commitment To Time
- Topiary Needs Movement
- Harry Potter Inspires. Alice In Wonderland Does Not...
- Boxwood Should Be Used Sparingly
- All Parterres Should Be Grubbed Out
- Topiary Is Only For Posh Gardens (Houseplants Are For Everyone Else)
- Topiary Combats Climate Change

(You can read the Topiary Provocations from the Spring session [here](#).)

## **Post Provocation Discussion (The Important Bit!)**

### Topiary Is Climate Positive

This provocation got a huge response on two of the three sessions. And it should.

Cut once a year.

Use shears instead of petrol hedge trimmers.

Don't burn the arisings, but put them in a long-term compost heap and sequester the carbon back into the ground (and provide great habitat for wildlife too!)

With topiary, you are never turning over the soil once they are planted, so carbon is never lost by digging.

If you want to reduce your carbon footprint, topiary is a positive move for a garden.

### Plant Availability Will Change The Landscape

Yes, large topiaries are available from nurseries... if you reserve early and can pay the price.

To get around this, we may look at UK growers for our plants (with the side benefit of a reduction in the carbon footprint of the planting) or we may start planting fast-growing deciduous trees - hawthorn and hornbeam may replace yew and boxwood as popular topiary plants.

If UK growers do not have stock available, it may also force our hand in designing topiaries from existing planting,

I hope we will see a need for topiary artists to get creative and produce an architectural effect from plants that formerly may have been cut down and stump ground out.

This attitude of adaptation and creation from existing plants was a theme followed on by Octavian, a nurseryman in Berkshire. He suggested one silver lining to the boxwood caterpillar eating plants was that you cut away the damage, then use what remains to create a new shape.

Boxwood is particularly amenable to organic, flowing shapes, and I am excited about hearing young gardeners and topiary artists seeking solutions from the plants and the health of the plants they have available.

One last mention goes to alternative varieties of boxwood. Boxwood has a huge range of leaf sizes, colours and branching characteristics - I love pruning 'Bowles Blue' for example, not just because it clips easily, but it shimmers with its metallic blue leaf in winter sun.

Yet I never see it used anywhere. Let's seek to make these alternative varieties available!

## Topiary Is For All

My provocation that topiary is only for big gardens and manor houses was refuted by many!

This is a warming thought that topiary has its champions and enthusiasts, whatever the size of garden, but I am not convinced the majority of people think topiary is a normal part of a normal garden.

Why spend money on topiary when you need a BBQ and garden furniture?

I do make topiaries in small gardens, but it is often borne of practicality - to reduce the shade caused by a large tree or shrub, without losing the privacy it provides from neighbours.

You need enthusiasm to have topiary, to like that element of 'control' over a part of the garden, as well as enjoying the physical act of pruning.

It would be lovely to gather together a group of photos of topiary in small gardens, to advertise how it can be used to provide structure and contrast no matter the amount of space you have.

My challenge to you - set up an Instagram account for 'Topiary In Small Gardens' and collate these photos - and spread the joy of topiary for all!!!!

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for reading this Autumn 'Topiary Provocation'. Do check out the Spring 'Topiary Provocation' too, for more thoughts on what modern topiary looks like.

It seems to me that topiary always suffers from the time it takes to make, the patience and investment needed in growing it. But as was pointed out by a designer in the last provocation session, Capability Brown sold a picture, not a garden.

Topiary is about having a dream.

This also suggests to me topiary is for young people - it is climate friendly, a creative act, needs maintaining only once a year and is useful as a screen for privacy in small gardens... a small garden is what most young people are likely to have.

And as lurid as this thought seems, young people have the time (all being well and fortunate) to plant something small and see it grow.

Thank you again for reading this. Do contact me with any questions or help you may need. It will be a pleasure to make some modern topiary with you!

Darren, Modern Mint

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## **Services**

I am a full-time topiary artist, travelling all over the UK to:

- Make fun new topiary
- Maintain or renovate old topiaries
- Compose new topiary and green architecture that suits the landscape
- Teach pruning technique
- Advise on plant health
- Prune roses, wisteria and fruit trees - please plant more orchards! They are beautiful spaces, and can have a modern twist. For example, I have just planted an orchard of magnolia - maintenance free but still full of blossom in the spring!

## **Who Took Part In The Topiary Provocation?**

- Chris Poole
- Petra Sturgeon
- Elizabeth Scott
- Gail Falkingham
- John Bates
- Sonja Kalkschmidt
- Laura Birkin
- Laura Ramsbottom
- Mimi O'Carroll
- Arlene England
- Ann Dukes
- Members of the European Boxwood And Topiary Society!

## **Plant A Tree In The Modern Mint Grove**

If you have enjoyed reading this and would like to say thank you, please consider planting a tree - £6 per tree, via Trees For Life, a charity who are aiming to rewild the Cairngorms.

Take a look here - [Modern Mint Grove At Trees For Life](#)