



A Topiary Provocation, Spring 2021

What Is The Topiary Provocation About?

My name is Darren and I am a gardener who specialises in topiary and pruning. I travel around the country making topiary and transforming shrubs and hedges with a pruning saw and a pair of shears.

I am interested in how topiary (by topiary I mean any plant pruned for a designed or architectural effect) can be used in a modern garden.

Topiary is rarely chosen as a 'must-have' in a garden design (easy maintenance and social spaces are the key features garden designers must deliver to clients). The word itself holds a stigma - "Topiary is for big estates and posh gardens only, not mine!" or "Much too hard to do. Where do I even start to prune?"

In the hope of exploring topiary beyond these languid ideas, I invited a number of garden designers to a meeting via Zoom in Spring of 2021 and presented a set of 'provocations' - some silly, some true, some deliberately adversarial or obtuse.

But all designed to get people to look at topiary, for just a moment, on the slant.

The designers were then asked to offer their feedback on what 'provoked' them the most. I have collated below the common themes that came up in discussion.

It makes for interesting reading...

The 9 Provocations

- You Need Simple Shapes, Clipped Well
- Contrast Improves The Topiary
- Deciduous Plants Should Be Used More Often
- Women Design Better Topiary Than Men
- Formal Topiary Is Old-Fashioned, Twee Edwardianism
- Organic Topiary Suits Modern Life
- Topiary Should Not Be Designed (But Made In the Moment)
- Boxwood Is No Longer Relevant
- Maintaining Topiary Is Easy

Post Provocation Discussion (The Important Bit!)

Topiary is a commitment - in financial outlay or in time.

It may be years before a topiary develops the character and weight of material it needs to look great in the garden. When you design you have to sell a result, and although deeper pockets may afford plants that by-pass this time, potentially you tone down what you want to make for a client because what the nursery has available limits the choice.

As a designer a solution may be to reshape existing shrubs and trees, so you are a few years closer to a fulsome topiary.

Or you sell the idea to the client that their garden space is an investment for the future - whether they plan on living there a long time or not, they should do their best for the space before passing on the 'baton' of this piece of land.

Topiary works best when a client is committed to the process. Gaining this commitment is the best way to make topiary relevant in a modern garden.

Topiary brings an element of playfulness to a garden.

Topiary is often seen as boring and restrained when, if made and clipped well, it can bring something unique to the space and allow the client to stamp their own personality on the garden.

This may be done by creating a looser, organic topiary which accentuates the odd limbs and branches of a shrub, allowing the character of the plant (and so the client) to come through.

But even a formal topiary has this sense of fun if clipped well - perhaps acting as a counterpoint to a wild flower border during the summer, then in winter becoming a major element in its own right, all straight edges and order.

This too can certainly express a client's attitude and preoccupations...

An ability to design or make a playful topiary stems from an understanding of the historical shapes - the figurative greyhound's from 16th Century English gardens, or mop-heads and bird's from the 19th Century - straight through to the ubiquitous blobs of boxwood that stand in rows along garden paths (and look to me like Disney's 'minions' when cloaked in their fresh, brighter spring growth).

You must have these basic shapes in your design toolbox, but then allay it to both modern life and the garden space itself. Great fun can be had pulling at the thread of a client's cultural references - the landscape around them, the music they listen to, the parts of life they most enjoy.

I am often asked for Alice In Wonderland topiaries, while other cultural references are completely ignored. Where are the Dr Seuss shapes? How is the narcissism of the 'tongue out selfie' not referenced in Taxus (its common name Yew threading a beautiful pun

through the idea itself), how can the shapes magnified under the microscope of science be so ignored?

As an example, a young student on a course I taught with the European Boxwood & Topiary Society designed a 'Golden Snitch' from a Lemon Cypress. Extraordinary work, made by someone uninfluenced and unencumbered by what is considered 'ok' to make.

Tapping into this potential is exciting, but it needs a designer to encourage this playfulness in the client.

Educate clients on how a topiary evolves.

This runs in parallel to the above points - getting clients to understand more about their garden is so important.

If they understand how using pruned plants for visual, textural and fragrant effect takes time to realise, they will be less worried about having maintain it (or so worried that the tree looks so awful and bare in year one as you begin to shape it!)

With a better appreciation of what is happening, a client may enjoy the creative process, adjusting better to the vagaries of nature and cultivating plants.

I am aware as a designer you must sell the final result, but perhaps leaving a spot or two in the garden with shrubs that have no set design at the start is a way to give a client their part in the direction the garden takes - the thrill of making in the moment, seeing what *can be*, rather than what *must happen*.

It is reiterating the commitment topiary needs...

Would a technique and creativity in topiary workshop be useful to offer designers specifically? To start with you, in order to filter this down to the clients?

Boxwood is to become a niche plant due to the boxwood caterpillar.

Why bother planting boxwood if you know what a pain it is going to be keeping it free of the caterpillar that so loves to eat it?

There is nothing like boxwood to clip, and I would recommend persevering with it - maintenance can be made less overwhelming (see research by the European Boxwood and Topiary Society.)

Otherwise, you could also just use boxwood as special pieces of 'green sculpture' in the garden design, focusing attention on 2 or 3 important pieces and reducing the opportunity for the caterpillar.

There are many varieties of boxwood too, often unused - 'Bowles Blue' has a large, thick leaf with a blue shimmer to it that clips beautifully, and seems to be unaffected (at the moment.)

Trying to shoehorn other plants into the role boxwood plays in the garden seems odd - Ilex crenata or Euonymus 'Green Spire' are often direct replacements, but Ilex is a tad fussy and the Euonymus variety, though it looks like boxwood from a distance, tells you in its name it has a different character - a vertical growth that wants to go up to the sky.

I suggest exploring the potential of different plants for use as topiary, rather than fitting square pegs into round holes.

Use native deciduous species as topiary.

Deciduous plants are regularly predated, so sprout again when clipped, making them excellent topiaries.

They blend into natural planting schemes, becoming a resting point for the eye, but can also act as a counterpoint in modern plantings. They warm a view when placed next to evergreens, and are particularly effective in their transitions - from leaf to transparency, via flowers or berries.

Maintenance is easy too. I would love to see them used more by designers (because I love to clip them!)

Start with simple shapes - cones, tiers, lollipops - as I feel using deciduous as a topiary is already curious, so hang the idea off a simple shape. Exotic shapes can be explored through the more classical topiary plants like yew and boxwood (of course I would be thrilled if you can prove me wrong...!)

A Follow-Up Topiary Provocation

Monday November 8th 2021 via Zoom.

Register for [a ticket here](#) for further provocations and a discussion on how you have changed the way you view topiary this year.

Conclusion

Many thanks for reading this 'Topiary Provocation'.

I hope it will inspire you to think about how we use clipped plants in the garden, perhaps to be bolder in your choice of plants, or shapes, or leaf textures....

Or of course to go the complete opposite direction and be more subtle with your topiary design, merely editing branches to shape the way light falls into a garden space...

But whichever way your design instinct takes you, give topiary and the way your plants are pruned as much thought as you give to the stone used for a patio, or the position of lights below trees.

Thank you again, it was a pleasure to share these thoughts with you, and do contact me with any questions or help you may need, it would be great fun to begin working on solutions like the education of topiary...

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Services

I am always happy to help someone interested in giving their garden more thought. So if you need advice or practical work in the following areas:

- Making topiary from new or existing plants (in a formal or organic style)
- Maintaining or renovating old topiaries (this is both useful and popular!)
- Topiary design in consultation with the client and the landscape
- Teaching technique and the most useful elements of design to you, your client or their gardener in private workshops on-site
- Consultation for designer's on shapes, plants to use and maintenance plans
- Advising on health, pests and diseases on the classic topiary planting palette
- Pruning fruit trees, roses, wisteria, other climbers and flowering shrubs (I love orchards and pruning fruit trees. If you have the space, please plant more orchards!)

Who Took Part In The Topiary Provocation?

- Dan Bristow - <http://www.propagatingdan.com>
- Anna Piussi - <https://in-giardino.com>
- Nicola Tsoukatos - <https://ntgardendesign.com>
- Pip Smith - <https://www.pipsmith.co.uk>
- Leonie Wade - leonie72wade@googlemail.com
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