



INSTANT GARDEN CHARM FOR YOUR TABLE

JUST WRAP A FRAME WITH A VINE FOR
TABLETOP TOPIARIES IN MINUTES

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The ancient art of topiary is a wonderful way to bring fun, versatility, and formality into your garden and home. What's topiary? Simply trimming and shaping plants into ornamental shapes, which can be any object or geometric shape you can imagine. Garden history books describe Tuscan villas with animals formed from boxwood nearly 2,000 years ago, and ever since, this historic garden art form has remained popular in estate and home gardens throughout the world. The term "topiary" can mean something as large as a garden giraffe or as small as a tabletop centerpiece, but it's always related to shaped plants.

Decades can pass before a boxwood topiary reaches its full maturity and beauty, coaxed by a patient gardener with sharp shears in hand, snipping here and there to form a perfect privet sphere, cone, or spiral as a centerpiece in a knot garden or a pair of yew sentinels to grace a formal entry.

Remember the amazing topiary animals that Johnny Depp created in the 1990 movie *Edward Scissorhands*? A fantastic real-life example of whimsical topiaries can be found at Green Animals Topiary Garden outside Newport, Rhode Island, where a giant elephant, dinosaur, camel, lion, giraffe, and unicorn cohabitate on seven acres of this lovely estate garden overlooking Narragansett Bay. These spectacular topiaries were started nearly a century ago.

But if you haven't decades of patience or room in your backyard for a twenty-five-foot-tall giraffe, you can still enjoy topiary by training vines up and around wire frames and creating charming displays that will bring a bit of English whimsy to your interior. Tabletop topiaries are quick to make and easy to maintain. Embellished with decorative ribbons or ornaments, they make beautiful centerpieces for a holiday table (think bunnies at Easter, or hearts for a wedding.) Or consider making an ivy basket filled with a special bottle of wine for a delightful housewarming gift. The possibilities are endless, and your hostess will think you are very clever.

Here's What You Will Need

Begin with a wire frame. You'll find many shapes from which to choose, from a single to double ball, cone, teardrop, tree, lyre, heart, duck, or rabbit, just for starters. You can find these frames at florist shops or your local specialty garden center. Cliff Finch's Topiary Zoo (www.topiaryzoo.com), a

family-owned business that's been making all sizes and shapes of handcrafted frames since 1981, is a great online resource. Finch powder coats his frames to prevent them from rusting.

Select your frame; then find a sturdy pot to hold it. Generally, you'll want the exposed frame to be twice as tall as the pot you choose. Fill the pot with a fast-draining potting soil, and have green cotton twine or plastic ties handy to hold plant runners to the frame, since they're sometimes a bit too stiff to easily weave. If you use a terra cotta pot, add some character and "instant age" by painting it with buttermilk to encourage the growth of moss.

The Best Plants to Train

Due to its quick growth and small leaf size, English Ivy is probably the most common and is perfect for tabletop topiary. Some excellent varieties are 'Walthamensis', 'Wichtel', 'Shamrock', 'Midget', variegated 'Lady Frances', 'Deltoidea', and cross-shaped 'Rittenkreuz'. But there are lots more, so find a leaf shape you love and buy young plants with long, pliable runners. Train rosemary for a useful kitchen display, or try spring-blooming jasmine for a fragrant bedside creation.

Two Ways of Training Your Topiary

Transplant your plant from its nursery container into the decorative pot, then insert the pronged frame on top. Alternatively, place the frame into the pot and place vines from two-inch pots around its base. Begin wrapping one runner at a time around the frame, being careful not to force the stems, or they will snap. Wrap the second runner around the same wire in the opposite direction, and add a third runner in the original direction if you like. Repeat the process with each wire; don't jump from one wire to another with the same runner, or you'll muddle the shape of the topiary form. Tie stiff stems in place with string or twist ties, which can be removed once the runners are trained into place.

Caring for Your Topiary

Now comes the fun of watching it grow and fill the frame. Wrap, clip, and pinch new growth regularly, following the shape of the frame. Keep your plant well-watered and mist its leaves often, and you'll be rewarded with a lush tabletop topiary in no time at all. ■