

The History of Topiary

Popular in gardens for thousands of years, topiary is the art of clipping plants into a range of sculptural or decorative shapes. Providing year-round structure and interest, they are often a useful backdrop or focal point as well.

In Europe, topiary first appeared in Roman times, with Pliny the Elder describing evergreens clipped into the shape of obelisks and animals in the Tuscan villa belonging to high-ranking dignitary Gaius Matius. The practice spread beyond Italy and has achieved peaks of popularity at various points in history.

Following the Norman Conquest, the British became enthusiastic about mazes and labyrinths, while the later Tudors planted knot gardens, with “ribbons” of different-coloured box in a criss-crossed or knotted style.

Parterres made of clipped box and yew, in repeated swirling patterns or orderly geometric designs, took off during the Renaissance and remained popular in Europe, particularly in the châteaux of France. In Britain, the practice of topiary was revived in the late 19th and early 20th century. This acted as a formal foil to the relaxed planting in Arts and Crafts gardens, as epitomized by the work of Gertrude Jekyll and Edwin Lutyens, and due to its enormous versatility, it has remained in fashion ever since.

In parallel to the European tradition, topiary has also been practised in China and Japan, but rather than rigid geometric forms, the aim here is to create trees that represent an idealized view of nature.

Right Spectacular topiary towers make for a moody scene in the gardens of Château de la Ballue, Brittany, France.

