



# SHEAR GENIUS

Award-winning international garden designer Arne Maynard has loved topiary since childhood. Now he uses it in many of his commissions and at his own home where 30 clipped trees grace the gardens

My earliest memory of topiary is from when I was about four years old. From the back seat of my mother's car, on our way home from the local market town, I always noticed a majestic topiary growing tall like an amazing statue and cut into lots of layers. It was like an incredible wedding cake. On spotting this stately yew I always knew we were a few minutes from home and I would soon be out of the car and running into the garden to play again.

This single piece of topiary was a signpost, indicating arrival for me. Now, when I think of topiary in a garden, this is one of its key functions, letting us know that either we have arrived or marking a significant point within the garden.

I believe topiary is a very important planted structure within the garden as it provides vertical scale to its surroundings and adds often very necessary weight. I will seldom plan a garden without it. It is incredibly versatile and has an amazing ability to be completely at home in a humble cottage garden, where it sits comfortably with apple trees, flowers and vegetables or in grander schemes where it could be used in a very formal way in rigid rows of clipped



shapes. Topiary becomes the punctuation within both of these types of garden.

The great strength of topiary is that it has so many functions within a garden and when using topiary it is important to consider what you want it to do. For example, you may require winter structure and what a beautiful sight topiary clothed in snow or frost can be, casting long shadows on lawns. Alternatively it can be a way-mark. A pair of topiaries at a gateway can guide the way into another part of the garden, creating a welcoming entrance. Topiary can also frame a view beyond, acting like sentinels to help draw the eye. A single example, perhaps growing from a hedge in a cottage garden introduces a hint of formality to contrast with soft, tumbling planting to give an air of relaxed but well tended garden. Or a hint of whimsical and carefree nature can be introduced when the new soft growth appears on yew and box topiary in the spring.

I quite often use topiary within formal gardens, and used correctly sometimes all you need within such gardens are topiary trees, hedges and lawn to create a very simple green but formal space. This type of formality must sit but must not appear to be trying to be too grand for its setting. To lessen the formality, and a combination I do



love, is placing clipped topiary within bands of long wild flower meadows of tall grass with oxeye daisies and ragged robin. This gives something that could look very manicured a look of gentle calmness and sophistication, which when you then come to cut the grass after the wild flowers have finished returns to that of a more formal nature.

At my home, Allt-y-bela I have 30 topiaries. They are not planted with any particular structure or pattern but are grouped around the house in singles and clusters. The yew shapes on the whole are kept to very simple domes and a few large balls. These pieces range from 150cm high to 350cm high. Amongst these yew trees I have also planted large beech topiaries and these have more complicated shapes such as cones or tall, tiered wedding cake pieces. To me these are like characters at a ball or a gaggle of people, each having their own personalities, created by years of clipping.

I chose to use yew and beech at Allt-y-bela, the yew giving me the mass of dark green adding structure and weight to my garden, which sits in rolling hills and woods and the evergreen has the formality to hold hands with the Elizabethan tower. The beech is clipped in more complicated shapes and can take these shapes because it has been taken from a tree that feels at home in this broadleaf environment.

Topiary need not always be cut from yew or box, there are endless plants that can be used. Yew does give topiary a formality and grandeur, but try using deciduous field maple, hornbeam, beech or even hawthorn. All of these cut well and their bare branches in winter give a tightly knitted framework of cinnamon coloured twigs. Using native plants for topiary can give it a naivety that is very charming. I have clipped a couple of hawthorns in the fields beyond the house into

simple domes and these add an element of fun.

All of my topiaries grow amongst carpets of bulbs and wild flowers in spring and summer, helping to soften its look and allowing it to be both part of the architecture of the house and the pastoral environment beyond. By combining these elements the topiary belongs and sits comfortably in its

setting. In winter, when the grass is kept short, it looks more formal and becomes a nice contrast to the transparent wilder woods close by.

In terms of maintenance so many people say to me that the trimming of my topiaries must take a lot of time. However, I find it one of the nicest jobs in the garden. I prune the yew once a year in late July and the beech twice a year at the end of June and a final tidy in late September. I only use hand shears, as it is so important that it must be a slow process to get the right cut and shape. The sound on a summer evening of bird song and shears clipping away are to me pure bliss and every time I trim and cut I acquaint myself with an old friend. ■

Arne is running a 'Traditional and Contemporary Topiary and Knots Gardens' course on Tuesday, 16 June at Allt-y-bela, near Usk in Monmouthshire. It is one in a series of year-round garden courses. To find out more or to book a place, visit [www.arnemaynard.com](http://www.arnemaynard.com) or telephone 020 7689 8100.



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