

TOPIARY BASICS



If you're looking for a fun plant-growing project that's not too challenging yet produces a conversation-worthy result, you're ready to try creating topiary. You may have seen topiary in public landscapes, where shrubs and trees are shaped into animals, cartoon characters, or more abstract forms. Using similar techniques, you can create living sculptures from indoor plants on a smaller scale. **Here's how to get started.**

Plant Picks

You can choose from many types of indoor plants for your topiary. Many are vining plants that climb and spread readily, in some cases aggressively. Topiary plants need flexible stems so you can guide them in the direction you want them to grow. And they must tolerate frequent pruning. Experienced growers recommend that beginners choose from a few common houseplants. These include English ivy, creeping fig, grape ivy, pothos, and rosemary.

Basic Steps

Frame. A simple, open-frame topiary is the easiest style to start with. You can buy a wire frame at a garden center or craft store. You can also fashion your own by bending a coat hanger or other rigid wire into a circular, triangular, or heart shape.

Plant and pot. Pick one of the vining plants such as English ivy or creeping fig. Choose a sturdy terra cotta or glazed ceramic pot with drainage holes.

Soil and set-up. Fill the bottom half of the pot with equal parts sand and loose potting soil. (*The sand adds stability.*) Stand the wire form upright inside the pot. Add potting soil around it and press it firm so the form stays in place.

Cover the roots. Gently remove the plant from its pot, taking care not to pull off the roots. Set it in the pot and cover the roots with an inch or two of soil.

Guidance and direction. Wrap each vine separately around the topiary form on opposite sides. Use plant clips, twist-ties or soft cotton twine to loosely secure them to the wire. Don't tie too tightly or you might damage your plant. Water thoroughly.

Pruning and pinching. As the plant grows, continue to direct the vines so that it encircles the form, clipping and trimming any shoots that go in the wrong direction. Once the vines have reached each other, pinch the tips to encourage side shoots that can be trained to fill in empty spots and give the topiary a lush appearance.

Care and Maintenance

Light. The specific light requirements depend on the plants used, but in general most topiary houseplants prefer bright but not direct sunlight. During the winter months, you may need to supplement natural light with artificial lighting (*LED fixtures*) to keep the plants looking full. In natural light, rotate your topiary one-quarter turn every week to encourage symmetrical growth.

Water and food. As with most houseplants, the soil for topiary should be evenly moist, but not soggy. Feed them monthly with liquid organic houseplant fertilizer to ensure they stay green and produce fresh leaves.

Pest control. Topiaries are susceptible to some of the common pests of houseplants, particularly spider mites, which thrive in warm, dry air. Placing the pots on a humidity tray in winter can help prevent spider mites, but if you do see the little pests on your plant rinse it thoroughly in the shower and keep repeating every two or three days for a couple of weeks until they are gone.

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[University of Vermont Extension: Creating Indoor Topiary](#)

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