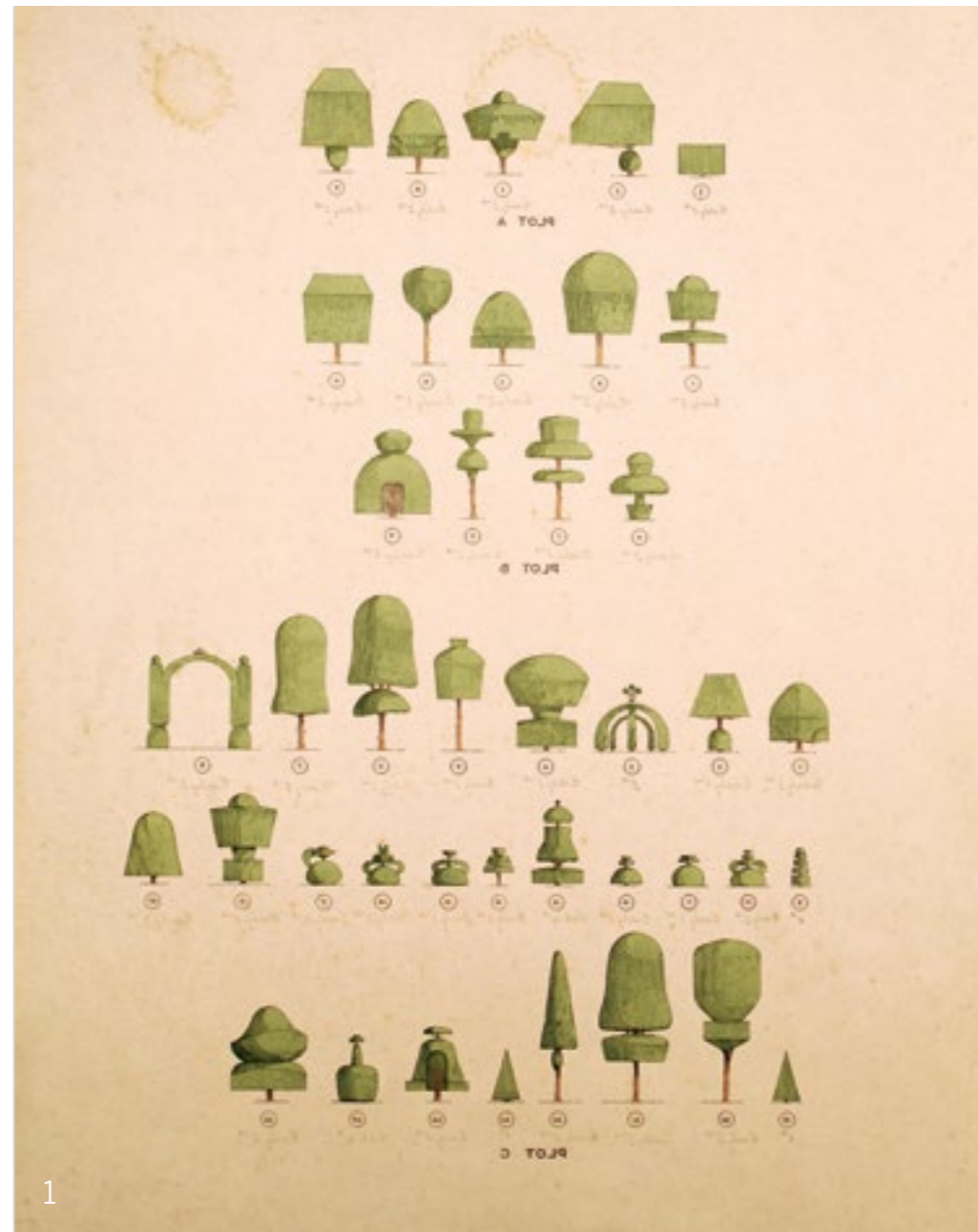


### 1 Battle plan

One of the most remarkable topiary gardens in Britain is at Levens Hall in Cumbria. The gardens were laid out in the late 17th century by Guillaume Beaumont, one-time gardener to James II. In the mid 1700s, when fashionable landowners were ripping out their formal gardens, this one survived and has steadily become ever more fantastical and extravagant, as this plan recording just some of the many shapes in the garden in 1927. Today you should look out for chess pieces, a judge's wig, Queen Elizabeth and a small flock of peacocks.



1

LEVENSARCHIVE

### 2 Flights of fancy

I'm not 100 per cent sure what these chaps are – possibly peacocks – but they are particularly remarkable because they're not even faintly formal. The yew hedge at Little Malvern Court, Worcestershire, upon which they sit is clipped but relaxed showing that not all topiary needs to be pitch perfect and follow military lines.



2

### 3 Abstract style

This abstract topiary inspired by the work of Henry Moore in the fabulous Priona Gardens in the Netherlands. The gardens were made by Henk Gerritsen and Anton Schlepers in the late 1970s, guided by Mien Ruys' idea of 'wild planting in a strong design'. Gerritsen explained the design principle as 'What is straight, should be curved; what is curved, should be straight'.



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### 4 Green sky thinking

This is a beautifully cloud-pruned hedge from Tom Stuart-Smith's garden for Laurent-Perrier at the 2010 Chelsea Flower Show. Each billowing box form is clipped so that there is both definition and mingling. Looks simple but is very difficult to achieve effectively. Sharp shears and an artist's eye.

I or II?



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## Battle lines

In the ongoing war between man and nature, topiary is often the gardener's weapon of choice – and one that can be used to frame views, mark entrances or simply to amuse

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR

**G**ardening can sometimes be a battle – usually a rather polite and well-behaved one, but still pretty vicious at times. It is a battle between the gardener and nature and most of the time we lose – or, at the very least, are forced into fighting a desperate rearguard action. In some parts of this conflict, however, we are in control and the obvious manifestation of this is in topiary. Man (or woman) imposing his (or her) will upon innocent shrubs and turning them into, well, pretty much anything from razor-edged hedges, crisp-edged obelisks and perfectly balanced spheres to peacocks, pussy cats or vague amorphous masses.

Topiary has a long and ancient tradition. The word itself comes from the Latin *Topiarius* meaning landscape gardener – chaps (usually slaves) in tunics running around Lucullan pleasure grounds with shears. The invention of topiary, in Europe at least, is credited to

one Cnaeus Matius Calvinus, a mate of Julius Caesar, whose clipped shapes and animals are described by both Pliny and Martial. Needless to say, however, the Chinese and Japanese were way ahead of Europe already with the arts of Penjing and Bonsai respectively.

Many of the great 16th- and 17th-century gardens were stuffed with topiary. Le Nôtre's Versailles was peppered with cones and dolmens of box and yew, and the skills of French topiarists were much in demand. Then topiary fell out of fashion and entered a period of darkness as the likes of Charles Bridgeman and William Kent took over and all those grand formal gardens were transformed back into considered landscape and rolling hills. Like most things (except, perhaps, fake-fur bomber jackets) fashions always come round again and it was back again in the late 1800s, and more recently taken up with enthusiasm by the Arts and Crafts

### 5 Block style

Another Chelsea Flower Show offering – this time from Christopher Bradley-Hole’s garden for the *Daily Telegraph* in 2013 – a sensational fusion of English and Japanese design with a drizzle of abstraction. It shows how the beautifully clipped shapes can lift the elegantly gauzy planting within.



5

### 6 Park life

Topiary is not just for Europeans. The Francisco Alvarado Park in Costa Rica has an extraordinary range of strange shapes and creatures created by Evangelisto Blanco since the 1960s. Most of these are clipped from cypress or juniper and include dinosaurs, monkeys and elephants, and some that could be the love child of any of the above.



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### 7 In the pink

See, I told you that not all topiary had to be green. These are the magnificent clipped azaleas from Villa Carlotta, which is on Lake Como in northern Italy. In April and May there are great joyful waves of colour surfing down from the house to the water. Those of you of a nervous disposition should not worry, however, it all reverts to green again after flowering.

▷ movement in the late 19th century and early 20th century. In fact the key book on the subject was *Garden Craftsmanship in Yew and Box* by Nathaniel Lloyd who was, of course, Christopher Lloyd’s father and the man who brought Edwin Lutyens to Great Dixter.

For the modern designer topiary is still popular as it forms a perfect foil for more naturalistic planting schemes. Nuggets of hedge stand like Spartans while waves of gesticulating grasses and rampaging perennials crash around them. They add instant architecture to prairie schemes – very necessary as without that they can be a bit spineless and drifting – or can stand alone among perfect lawns or immaculate limestone to give a minimalist feel.

When we think of topiary the temptation is to think immediately of box or yew, which is unsurprising as they are both corking plants for the purpose. However, they are not alone and I have seen other

shrubs used in remarkable ways. One thing that has seen a massive rise in popularity is the multi-stemmed tree or shrub. This may not seem to be topiary by the purist but it achieves a similar effect in that it can anchor floaty planting but with the added dimension of being semi-transparent so that you can catch glimpses of the planting beyond or beneath. Tom Stuart-Smith’s divine *Viburnum rhytidophyllum* springs to mind: you may remember it as a line of majestically cloud-pruned shrubs set against Corten steel walls in his gold medal-winning 2006 Chelsea garden. Angus White, who owns Architectural Plants (a wonderful nursery in Sussex which you should all visit) has a section in his catalogue of plants ‘that can have architecture thrust upon them’, which includes a number of rather unexpected candidates such as *Magnolia grandiflora*, *Eriobotrya*, *Lithocarpus* and *Phillyrea latifolia*. These last are particularly useful



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### 8 Friends with benefits

In the (slightly adulterated) words of James Taylor: ‘When you’re down and troubled, and you need some lovin’ care...’ then you should really go to Great Dixter, East Sussex as it will always provide you not only with a lift but also a bit of inspiration. These are just some of the many outstanding bits of topiary that adorn both gardens and meadows.

#### Useful information

• **Architectural Plants**  
Stane Street, North Heath,  
Pulborough, West Sussex  
RH20 1DJ.  
Tel 01798 879213,  
architecturalplants.com

#### Further reading

*The Art of Creative Pruning: Inventive Ideas for Training and Shaping Trees and Shrubs* by Jake Hobson (Timber Press, 2011).

*Topiary* by Jenny Hendy (Southwater, 2008).

*Topiary and the Art of Training Plants* by David Joyce (Frances Lincoln, 1999).

#### Places to visit

**Wightwick Manor**, near Wolverhampton is a National Trust property in the Arts and Crafts style – it is neo-Tudor with a mock medieval great hall – and is much better than it sounds. The gardens were laid out as a series of hedged compartments in about 1887 by Alfred Parsons. The topiaries were augmented in the early 20th century by Thomas Mawson. Look out for the Poets’ garden, which was started from cuttings donated by Shelley, Tennyson, Dickens and William Morris. [nationaltrust.org.uk/wightwick-manor-and-gardens](http://nationaltrust.org.uk/wightwick-manor-and-gardens)

For one of the largest, craziest crosses between a hedge and a bit of topiary around you need to go to **Powis Castle** in Powys. The vast yews were planted in the 1720s and take a gardener in a cherry picker ten weeks to cut. [nationaltrust.org.uk/powis-castle-and-garden](http://nationaltrust.org.uk/powis-castle-and-garden)