

CHAMPAGNE DINNER | DECOY COLLECTING | HOLIDAY TOPIARIES

# VIRGINIA

LIVING

## Visions of *Sugarplums*



WWW.VIRGINIALIVING.COM

DECEMBER 2008 \$4.95

11 >



25274 57432 2



Two bunches of hanging amaranthus tied with gold ribbon are simple yet striking on the living room mantel. The swag is aucuba, hypericum berries, and peanuts sprayed gold. Facing page: The staircase garland builds live greenery on a faux support; detail of the swag; topiary in a stairway window.

**Topiary, the pruning and training of bushes into shapes,** probably grew out of an inherent human need to impose order in the landscape. The symmetry of solid geometric shapes offers a reassuring impression of permanence, which is hard to find where seasonal beauty is mostly fleeting. The green architecture that gives form and weight to the garden lends the same stately air closer to the home when boxwoods or other evergreens shaped into balls or cones rise from pots to stand sentinel, flanking entries or accenting focal points. This living ornamentation is especially effective because it lifts the eye upward from the two dimensional lawn or patio to include a third dimension of height.

You don't have to be as proficient a pruner as Edward Scissorhands to enjoy the main topiary shapes: lollipops, spirals and poodles (those multi-tiered balls on a single trunk, like the pompoms on Fifi's foreleg). Creative designers use special tricks to make them and fake them so that little to no maintenance is required. They sparkle at the holidays but can be used year round.

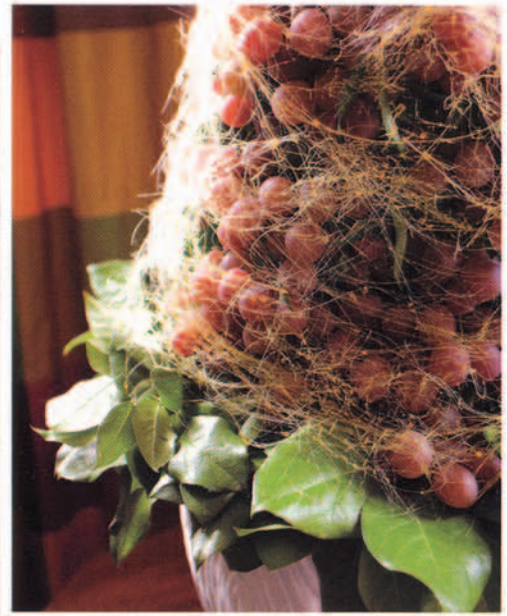
Florists use many faux techniques to craft mock topiaries for the home, putting globe shapes on all types of supports, from moss-covered dowels to braided pliable branches. You can incorporate traditional boxwood, pine, fruits and berries into topiaries, but don't forget unexpected Virginia materials ranging from peanuts and cotton bolls to gilded silk dogwood blossoms. These holiday creations can be wrapped with further surprises: Decadent sweets, from spun sugar in the dining room to candy mints in the children's room, put a fresh spin on the tradition.

The elegant entry of this Monument Avenue home in Richmond calls for some large-scale thinking and sturdy construction to achieve a topiary of the proper proportion. We selected an 8-foot closet pole as a frame, topped it with a decorative finial and sunk it in concrete in the bottom of a plain pot. The pattern of the home's intricate sidelights—their alternating circle and diamond pattern—inspired the topiary's shape, but we used rather unorthodox materials for both the large faux base we needed (bowls) and in the interesting texture that would conceal it (bolls). To mimic the circle design, we covered four huge Tupperware bowls, sprayed gold, with natural cotton bolls, pressed flat. Holes cut in the ends of the half-spheres allowed for sliding them into place on the pole. Hot-gluing along



# Visions of Sugarplums

**Topiaries add live ornamentation to your lively holiday decor.**  
By PAULA STEERS BROWN



Here and top right: The grape topiary is wrapped in golden spun sugar. Bottom right: one of the treat bags for the swag in the little girl's room.

their edges holds the forms together. For the diamond shapes between the globes, bent coat hangers were an easy armature for wiring on some fresh boxwood. The entire topiary in its utilitarian pot was then placed in a large, natural wood container, which was then filled to the brim with fresh green boxwood, concealing all artifice.

The grand staircase is festooned with aucuba, seeded eucalyptus, blue Atlas cedar, hypericum berries and silk dogwood blossoms sprayed gold. The live plant material is wired onto a faux garland for a fuller effect. Artificial materials take on a more real appearance when combined in this way with overlays of natural greenery and berries. Similar materials are echoed in the conical topiaries in the three windows along the staircase.

In the main living room, we chose an unlikely flower for the mantel topiaries—rich red hanging amaranthus. Topiaries often incorporate upright bloomers, but we took advantage of the scale of the house and gathered several stems of the cascading flowers at their base and tied them with wide ribbons that sweep down the long

stripped stalks in an exuberant flourish. A dowel rod inserted into the middle of the clustered stalks provides extra support. Below, accenting the fireplace, is a swag of aucuba, hypericum berries and clusters of peanuts sprayed glitzy gold. We cut the top out of a 20-inch wire form and attached the natural materials.

In the dining room, the traditional Williamsburg-style fruit sculpture has been updated with a cone of purple grapes laced with spun sugar. The base is three 24-inch Styrofoam

cones hot-glued together; Italian ruscus pinned onto the Styrofoam is the green background for the grapes. The entire cone is placed on a heavy cardboard circle base the size of the topiary bottom, with salal leaves lining the edge. For the decadent spun-sugar lace, boil sugar in water, whisk it and add beeswax to make it pliable. Move fast to deftly wrap the

topiary in the long gold strands of candy, before it hardens.

The decorations in the little girl's bedroom upstairs set the perfect tone for holiday dreams: Icy blue spruce with white Fuji mums on the mantel and in the asymmetrical swag below provide a nest for bags of surprise candies tied in frothy tulle. These fantasy arrangements inspire all types of possibilities of using fun removable treats in topiary centerpieces—they would make a wonderfully interactive element at your next

for brightly colored candies. Pull kids in on this decadent brainstorming—they will love it.

With their interesting shapes and pleasing fragrances, topiaries are also surprisingly popular additions to kitchens. Live rosemary topiaries are readily available in stores this time of year. These must be pruned, but the aroma makes that job a joy. Herbal topiaries date back to the tradition of knot gardens, where herbs for culinary and medicinal purposes were arranged to be decorative. Ani-

**These fantasy arrangements inspire all types of possibilities of using fun removable treats in topiary centerpieces—they would make a wonderfully interactive element at your next neighborhood children's party.**

neighborhood children's party. The globe can be a Styrofoam ball over which you glue any type of flower or leaf as a base for candies mounted on picks. Dried or fresh hydrangea, for example, pressed in small bunches to cover the surface makes a great background for pink bubblegum mounted on toothpicks. Purple statice could also be hot-glued as a vivid canvas

mal shapes are popular and offer a note of whimsy to a kitchen garden. Excellent culinary herbs for a kitchen topiary include sage, thyme, Mexican oregano, French lavender, santolina, curry plant, licorice plant, lemon verbena (though it must be allowed to go dormant from fall to February when grown indoors) and bay laurel. Scented geraniums can also be

From left: the garland in the child's room features blue spruce, Fuji mums and some surprises; The entryway topiaries, of cotton bolls and boxwood, mirror the circle and diamond design in the door's sidelights.



trained to grow in topiary shapes and offer delicious fragrances of rose, peppermint, nutmeg, apple, orange and strawberry.

Here, again, it would be entertaining to start with a purchased live topiary base and add to it for an interactive culinary party—for example, a winter drink bar theme. For teas, add rose hips to a chamomile topiary, or offer a coffee or hot chocolate bar where flower topiaries are garnished with marshmallows, dark or white chocolate, cinnamon sticks, peppermints or toffee pieces on skewers. ●

**CREDITS** FRONT DOOR: wood planter, \$145, from Williams & Sherrill, Richmond. LIVING ROOM MANTEL: studded low vases, \$24, from West Elm, Richmond. STAIRCASE: verdigris metal containers, \$25, from The Great Big Greenhouse, Richmond. GIRL'S ROOM: clear resin urns, \$160, from The Great Big Greenhouse, Richmond. DINING ROOM: faux bois planter, \$220, from Ruth + Ollie, Richmond.

Special thanks to Andrew Bain and the Bain family of Mill Run Farm, Dinwiddie, for providing the cotton bolls and assorted greenery, and also to Paula Steers Brown for the aucuba cuttings. On-set assistance by Ronald Blankenship and Billie Jo Darden.

## Top(iary) Tips

**FOR SPRING** Forsythia can be picked in early spring and be forced inside—select pliable young stems and follow the lines along wire forms to create an open topiary, being sure to keep the stem end in water at the base.

**FOR SUMMER, OUTSIDE** On the patio, train a hibiscus topiary (you often see young plants with three stems braided). Of course, rose standards are classic and formal.

**FOR SUMMER, INSIDE** For any fresh flower topiary, use Oasis (the green florist foam material that holds fresh stems in place as it retains water) in plastic “cages.” Or simply buy a big bunch of the flowers and gather the stems together tightly, handling gently, so that the flowers form a ball. Use a twist tie to secure the bundle of stems at the flower base, then cover that band with a quality ribbon to finish. Roses look great this way, as do less expensive carnations, but even wide-petaled flowers such as Gerbera daisies or bright sunflowers are effective.

**FOR FALL** Cover a ball with moss and add dried flowers (celosia, hydrangea, yarrow) with pods (poppy), nuts and

artificial or real fruit, or a mix of both.

**FOR WINTER** Bunch amaryllis with stems tied together so that the big blooms make a full top.

**OUTDOORS FOR URNS** For a short-lived magnolia topiary, use an Oasis ball 4 inches in diameter and cut 2 inches deep. Place the small end of a long branch in that and hot glue it in place; put the big end in an urn deep enough to be secure. Stick magnolia leaves into the Oasis ball so that they radiate out and are turned on many planes—or, for this topiary, you can use chicken wire stuffed with wet moss or wet leaves.

You can form a dried magnolia topiary with leaves treated in glycerin, but they turn brown unless you use a commercial preservative with a green dye in it. (If you do this, immerse crushed ends of stems in 1-2 inches of the preservative solution for about two weeks.)

Little bundles of lavender can be stuck into Sahara (the Oasis counterpart for holding dried arrangements): Use an elongated form, stick the end in an urn and mount it on a pedestal for height.

Boxwood, holly, juniper, pine, hemlock, yew and fir will all last a few

weeks if branch ends are placed into material that is kept wet.

**TRAINING VINES OUTSIDE** In the garden, vines can be trained into one large trunk so that the flower canopy is shaped. Even a grape vine can be made into a topiary, but you must prune annually to maintain a head of fruiting spurs. Handled this way, a relatively compact plant can yield large quantities of fruit.

**TRAINING VINES INSIDE** Grow any small-leaved ivy or fragrant jasmine on a metal frame ball. For more height, invert a tomato cage, gather the wires that normally stick into the ground into a point and wire them together to form a cone.

Gail Arnold, of Virginia Beach's Topiaries, Inc., suggests planting creeping Jenny and prostrate sedums in the soil next to the wire in a topiary form. “Sedums are wonderful in topiaries,” says Arnold, “because they require very little care and can carry through a light winter. I loosen the moss so the roots can easily grow. The difference between soil and moss is that the moss does not have nutrients, so you need to fertilize.”

Above all, have fun.