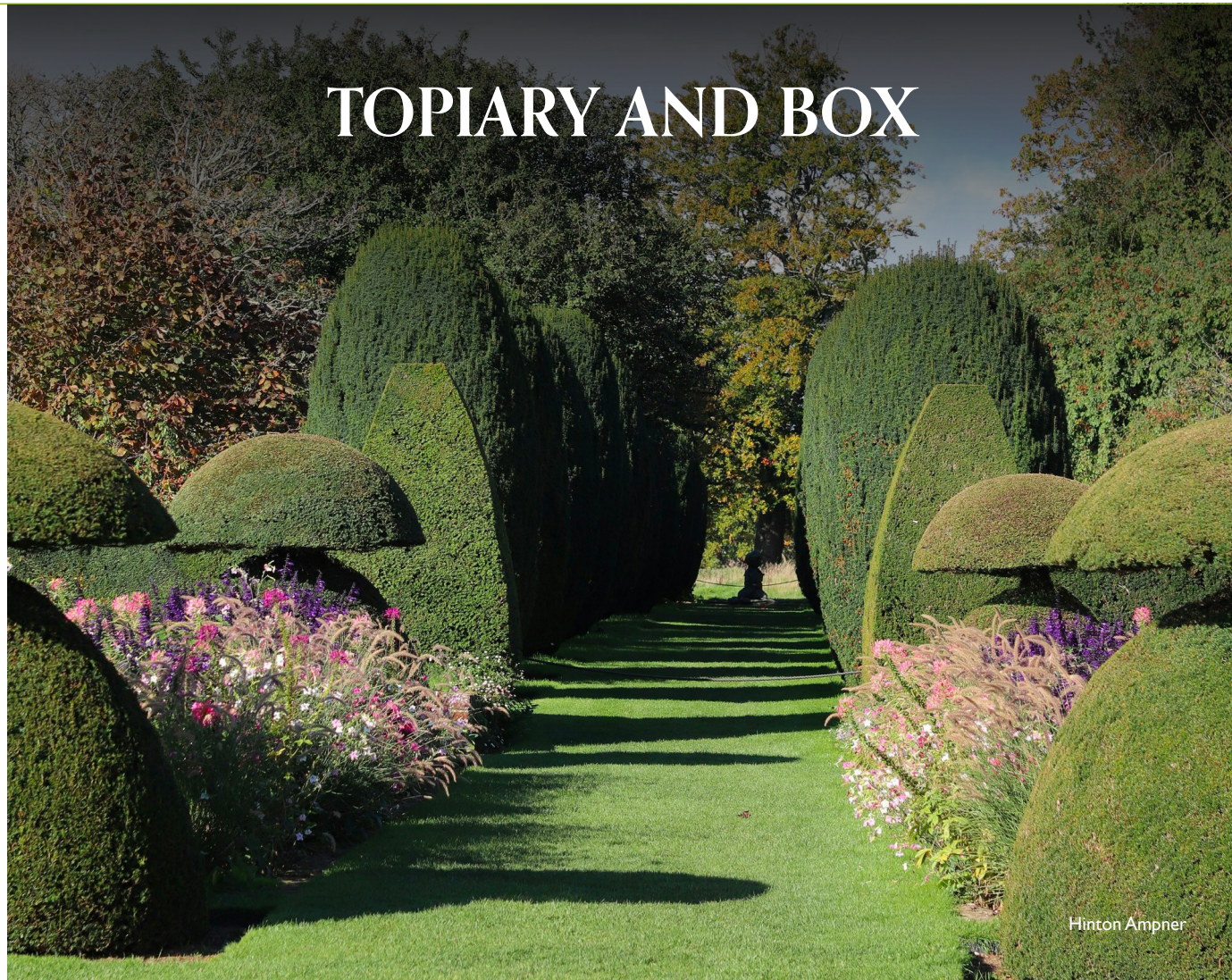




GARDEN

TOPIARY AND BOX



Hinton Ampner

Topariy is a blend of creativity and nature, an art expression that shapes shrubs and trees into ornamental forms. Inheriting topiary in a garden can be a true gift, especially if the plants have been well-maintained over the years.

With roots in Roman times, this ancient art involves clipping plants into living sculptures, often resembling animals or geometric shapes. Over the centuries, topiary has evolved and continues to be a statement feature in gardens today. Whether you have inherited topiary or are considering creating a specimen piece, understanding the plant and its care is key to preserving its form and topiary legacy.

Plant choice for topiary has varied over time. Typically plants are evergreen, although deciduous trees such as our UK native plants, Beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and Hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*), offer versatile interest. Their summer foliage is lush, and in winter, they retain the last of their leaves to reveal intricate branch structures that are an art form in themselves.

Evergreen plants Box (*Buxus sempervirens*) and Yew (*Taxus baccata*) are traditional favourites for topiary due to their dense growth and the ability to maintain precise, sculpted forms. Their slow growth rate allows greater control when shaping and helps maintain a smooth form for months.

Boxwood does come with some well known challenges, such as Box Blight, a fungal disease, and the Box caterpillar (the larvae of the Box moth), both of which can cause significant damage if not properly managed. However, with consistent care and a methodical approach, Box can remain healthy, and mature plants do not always need replacing if they encounter pests or disease. The use of biological controls and targeted plant treatments can help maintain the growth and health of Box, deterring pests and preserving prized topiary.

Some plant nurseries have stopped selling Box due to these challenges, offering alternatives for topiary. Popular evergreen options include



Standard tree at Portmeirion
© Sara Moore



 *Taxus baccata fastigiata*
at Portmeirion
© Sara Moore



Cloud Hedge at Hinton Ampner
© Sara Moore

Bay (*Laurus nobilis*), Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), Portuguese laurel (*Prunus lusitanica*), Burkwood (*Osmanthus burkwoodii*) and Holm Oak (*Quercus ilex*), among others. Most of these are widely available as ready-made topiarised shapes such as balls, cones, columns, cloud-pruned forms, or standard trees of various sizes.

Although less commonly used today, Green Olive (*Phillyrea latifolia*) was once highly valued in 16th-century Britain and was as prevalent as Box is today. In recent years, this plant has seen a resurgence thanks to its hardiness and tolerance of challenging conditions; it remains an excellent topiary choice and a nod to historical planting design.

Knowing the plant you are working with is important, as it helps guide the care and pruning it requires. Some species need frequent pruning, while others are more forgiving. When creating topiary from scratch, you may wish to choose a faster-growing, more vigorous plant such as Privet (*Ligustrum ovalifolium*) or Bush honeysuckle (*Lonicera nitida*). Look for plants with small, compact leaves and a strong ability to regenerate new

growth after cutting. For more complex designs, topiary frames or wire can help guide growth.

Not all is lost with neglected topiary which can often be revived. Species like Box, Yew and Holm Oak are particularly resilient and can tolerate hard pruning. If a topiary has outgrown its intended form, you can experiment and allow the plant to develop into a new shape. This process will require some creative flair, along with some patience and regular clipping to restore growth density. Over time, the shape can be reimagined and you will be rewarded with your own unique living sculpture.

Having the right tools is essential for topiary, and quality tools are well worth the investment. Japanese steel shears are excellent for general shaping with various offerings on the market from all-purpose shears to finer tools with curved blades designed for achieving perfect spheres. For more intricate clipping, one-handed topiary clippers work well for finer detail, while power hedge trimmers and long-reach pruners are ideal for tackling taller, larger-scale topiary forms.

Topiary is a long-term commitment that requires patience and dedication. With regular pruning needed to promote a dense, well-defined shape, it can take several years for a plant to develop into a fully formed sculpture, particularly if you are starting with a young plant. The effort and dedication are rewarded as a well-cared for topiary can last for many years, passing on the topiary tradition for future generations to enjoy. 🌿

Box alternative - at Borde Hill Garden in West Sussex, Wall Germander (*Teucrium chamaedrys*) has been incorporated into a geometric framework of low evergreen hedging alongside Box in the formal rose garden beds. It is easy to grow and its robust hardiness makes it an excellent alternative to Box for parterres and low hedging.

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