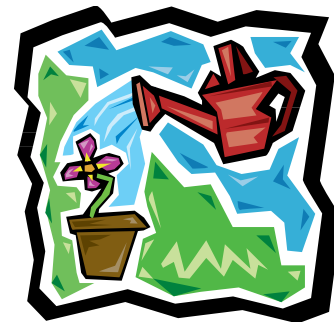




Make Your Own Topiary

| BY SHARON KATZ COOPER |



As spring arrives, we naturally start thinking about growing things. The days are longer and warmer. Blossoms begin to peek out of flowers, new leaves spout on trees and bushes, and lots of green shoots begin to poke out of the ground.

Why not do some creative planting of your own? Topiary is the art of cutting and trimming plants into designs. It comes from the Latin word “topia,” which means “ornamental gardening.” Building and growing a topiary plant is a fun, educational activity to do with your children. You may have seen topiary bushes around your neighborhood or in formal gardens. Often they are shaped into animals and other designs, but there is no need to try something quite that large or complicated. You and your children can build your own topiary for a windowsill or balcony and then enjoy watching it grow into your very own garden creation.

What You Need

- pot with drainage hole (and hanger if you want to hang it)
- wire or mesh screen
- fishing line or string
- sphagnum moss
- scissors
- plant (ivy works well)
- potting soil
- paperclips
- water

Note: You can get all of these materials at your local home improvement store.

What to Do

1. Soak the moss in water until it is thoroughly moistened.
2. Place enough potting soil in the bottom of your pot to fill it about three-quarters of the way to the top.
3. Shape a frame using your wire or mesh. Don't try to get too complicated, but do be creative – you can make it any shape you like.

For example, you can make a simple animal outline, star, or cone shape. Make sure that the bottom of the frame is no bigger than your pot. When you are done building the frame, wedge it gently into the pot's soil, making sure that it is secure.

4. Squeeze out some of the excess water from the moss and then pack it into the openings of your frame.

5. Wrap the fishing line or string around the moss so that it stays in place.

6. Plant your ivy (or other plants) around the edges of your pot.

7. Pull the growths and existing vines of your plants up around the frame as much as possible. Hold them in place with paperclips.

8. Watch your topiary grow! Water it often to keep the moss damp, but be careful not to over water. Also don't leave your topiary in full sunshine where it will dry out quickly.

9. As your topiary grows, watch what shape it forms. Does it look like what you thought it would? When the tendrils get long, weave them into the design or trim them to maintain shape.

For additional fun:

April is National Poetry Month, so work with your child to write a poem about your topiary plant. Spend a few minutes thinking about what gave you the ideas for its shape. Look at its colors and how it is growing. To get started, you may want to ask your child questions about your plant: What does it look like? What will it look like in a couple of months? How quickly does it grow? How similar is it to what you intended? Does it look like any other plants in your home, yard or neighborhood? With an older child, challenge him or her to write in a particular style, such as haiku or rhyming couplet.

This Helps Develop

Cognitive skills - the mental process of knowing by developing awareness, perception and reasoning.

Working with plants and natural objects helps build nature-awareness, observation skills,

and encourages natural curiosity. Children can watch the growth of a plant, make comparisons, and evaluate results of their efforts.

Fine motor skills - the use of small muscle movements in the hands that occur in coordination with eyes.

Working with their hands to shape and plant builds both small and large motor skills.

Language, the expressive ability to communicate ideas and needs, and the receptive ability to understand what is said or written.

Having your child write about the project enhances her description and writing skills – both of which are important lifelong skills for school and work. As well, ongoing discussion will strengthen your child's verbal skills.

Social emotional development - involves a child's feelings of self worth and confidence.

Children get a confidence boost when they share an activity with you. As well, caring for a living thing and watching it grow shows children how things thrive with a little love and attention.

Growing a plant is a wonderful feeling, especially when it grows in a unique shape created just by you and your child. Bring the sunny feeling of springtime indoors with you special topiary. ❖

This monthly family activity series, “Hands-on-Kids!” is brought to you by a partnership between the Children's Museum of Northern Virginia (CMNOVA) and FAMILY Magazine. For more activities you can do with your children to spark their love of learning, visit the CMNOVA web site, www.cmnova.org. On their web site you will also find information about the Children's Museum of Northern Virginia and how you can become involved. CMNOVA is committed to building a place where our children can freely explore and develop a lifelong love of learning. Sharon Katz Cooper is a museum educator and freelance writer in Fairfax. She is a volunteer with CMNOVA.