

grow

SHAPING UP A TOPIARY CAT

Expert sets to work on 'creature' that looked more like a mangy stray

By Mary Reid Barrow
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AFTER TWO YEARS in my garden, my topiary cat looked like a mangy stray that needed a good grooming.

So I turned to Gail Arnold at Topiaries on 25th Street in Virginia Beach for help. Over the years I have purchased several topiary animals from her, and she has always been willing to help me get them back on their feet when they got straggly.

This year Arnold is at the top of her form when it comes to making and planting topiaries. She spent two weekends in April at Busch Gardens' Ready, Set, GROW! events, where she conducted topiary demonstrations. She even decorated an 8-foot-tall Clydesdale horse topiary for the event.

So when my cat and I arrived at Arnold's shop, she took us through the replanting process step-by-step, as if we had gone to Busch Gardens, too. Now, I feel I can groom my topiaries by myself.

My cat is one of the newer topiary sculptures. Made from a sturdy wire frame and stuffed tightly with sphagnum

moss, the topiaries are sold unplanted. You can either plant them or simply put the mossy sculpture in your yard unplanted.

There are two ways to plant or replant them, Arnold said. One, you can plant a pretty, small-leaf ivy in the ground next to your animal's foot and train the ivy up and around its body.

"With ivy, there's no maintenance," she said. "It gets its nutrients from the ground."

The other method is to plant the animal itself, and that's what I wanted to do with my cat. Arnold prefers succulents like sedums and hens and chicks, because they don't need much water — an asset, because topiaries dry out faster than plants in pots or in the ground. Working with plant plugs is the very easiest, she said, but they are hard to find, so she generally works with potted plants from a nursery.

The sedum I brought to plant on my cat has little star-shaped yellow flowers this time of year and green leaves that turn bronze in winter.

"All kinds of sedums do great, though," she said, "and are low maintenance."

In addition to a plant, Arnold said to have wet sphagnum moss and wreath pins on hand. Before you start to work, soak your animal well so the sphagnum moss inside is wet all the way through.



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Gail Arnold, who owns Topiaries in Virginia Beach, stuffs moist sphagnum moss over the roots of the sedum she is planting on a topiary cat.

The wire animals generally come in two pieces and are held together at the center with hooks. Arnold undid my cat and laid its upper body on the table. Then she pulled out some of the tightly packed moss from the center of the cat's back to make a nest for the sedum roots.

"The most important thing is that roots are planted in the center of the

moss," Arnold said.

She loosened the moss around the hole with a screwdriver. "The roots must be able to maneuver in the moss."

When she unpotted the sedum, she left as much dirt around the roots as she could and still fit the roots into the hole. She used the wet sphagnum moss to fill in the hole and protect the roots.

"Cover the roots with a nice little blanket of wet moss."

She hooked my cat back together and used wreath pins to hold the plant's stems in place gracefully around the cat's back.

"Don't feel like you have to cover the whole animal," she said.

And she never covers an animal's face with plants, "because it takes the character away," she explained. My cat has little black eyes and a nose.

In addition to sedums, there are many other plants you can use to plant on topiaries. For example, Arnold likes groundcovers such as pretty light green speedwell, a vigorous creeper. She also uses plants that mound, like woolly thyme.

But, she warned, most other plants will require more water than sedums and other succulents. Keeping topiaries in semi-shade helps them hold moisture.

"Mix plants for texture. Experiment with what grows well in the yard and looks cute."

As for hens and chicks, think about using them around the edge of a topiary turtle shell or down the back of a topiary frog, Arnold suggested. She even added real feathers to the tail of a topiary rooster.

"Have fun with it," Arnold said.

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