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Background

Topiary is art of pruning and training plants into shapes. Topiary existed in ancient Greece and Rome. In the following two millennia the popularity of topiary increased and waned a number of times. In the mid 1800s topiary again became popular and has been practiced continuously since. In the far east the shaping of shrubs and trees has long been practiced. Unlike the western approach to make geometric or animal shapes, in the far east the objective is to achieve an artistic natural form. Japanese bonsai is one far eastern version of topiary.

Sphagnum Topiary

This form of topiary is based upon a shaped pipe and wire frame stuffed with sphagnum. The sphagnum is soaked and tightly packed into the frame so that it is very firm. Plants are inserted in the moss by using a tweezers or chop sticks to make a hole in the moss and then inserting the plant into the hole with additional sphagnum. Over time the moss and wire frame deteriorate from sun and watering and needs to be replaced. Often sphagnum topiary uses vines which require fewer plants and quickly cover the shape. Some writers attribute the development of sphagnum topiary to Disney who wanted to have his characters represented in Disneyland in the form of shrubbery.

Topiary at SDBG

The Mexican Garden topiary at SDBG uses succulents. The succulent topiaries were donated in 2005 by Pat Hammer the recently retired Director of Operations. Pat authored New Topiary: Imaginative Techniques from Longwood which is available in the SDBG Gift Shop, SDBG Library and on Amazon.

The use of succulents reduces the need for watering which results in a 15 to 20 year life for SDBG topiaries. This is longer than the life of topiaries that use vines which require frequent watering hastening the deterioration of the moss and rusting of the wire frames.

The SDBG topiaries are created and maintained by a small group of volunteers. Planting an entire topiary can require hundreds of hours of dedicated work.

The SDBG topiaries are portable and have been displayed at the San Diego County Fair. In 2002 all the topiaries were displayed in the Philadelphia Flower Show and the San Diego County Fair. In 2008 Dorothea was the first topiary converted to succulents and was displayed in the San Diego County fair in 2011. In 2014 Loretto and Maria were displayed at the fair. In 2016 two additional topiaries, White Rabbit from Alice in Wonderland and Winnie the Pooh were added to the SDBG collection located in the Seeds of Wonder Garden. White Rabbit was displayed in 2016 at the San Diego County Fair.

Maverick - The Gambler



Maverick is a card player. He is wearing a card player's visor and sleeve garters which are thought to reduce cheating by having a 'card up his sleeve'. Maverick is intently staring at the cards in his hand.

The Mariachi Band



The three Mariachi Band members are:

Guapo - the handsome guitar player
El Jefe - the trumpet playing leader of the trio
Panzon - the violin player with the little belly

The clay faces are masks made from the faces of three workers at Weidner's Gardens on Normandy Road in Encinitas.

The band is playing dancing music for Maria and Loretto.

The pots are placed in front of the players to discourage visitors from standing in front of the players for photos with the group. Photos are best taken with the visitor standing in back of the players.

Evelyn Cisneros - The Ballerina



This topiary is named after Evelyn Cisneros, the first Mexican American Prima Ballerina. She was born in Long Beach, CA and danced with the San Francisco Ballet from 1976 to 1999.

Maria & Loretto - The Dancers



Maria and Loretto are dancing to the music of the Mariachi Band.

The clay masks of the two dancers were made from the faces of Loretto and his wife Maria. Pat Hammer and Maria & Loretto are co-owners of Samia Rose Topiary. Loretto is hired by SDBG to stuff the topiaries.

In 2014 Maria and Loretto were displayed at the San Diego County Fair.

Don - The Handsome Waiter



Don is named after Don Walker, who along with Dorothy Walker, his spouse, was one of the founders of the San Diego Horticultural Society. His clay face was made from Don's face. Don took the photos of the most beautiful trees in San Diego area for Ornamental Trees for Mediterranean Climates authored by Steve Brigham.

He is carrying a bucket of beer for Maverick.

Dorothea - The Lovely Waitress



Dorothea is named after Dorothy Walker, the wife of Don Walker and one of the founders of the San Diego Horticultural Society. The clay face was made from her face.

In 2011 Dorothea was displayed at the San Diego County Fair.

Her serving tray is full with drinks for the Mariachi Players.

Succulents used in the Mexican Garden Topiaries

Jade is the 'work horse' of the Mexican Garden topiaries followed by Sedum. The topiaries are watered weekly by first having water dribbled on the plants followed by a light spraying. Don and Dorothea receive some direct sunlight resulting in more intense colors than the topiaries in shade most or all of the time.

Over time the plants used on each topiary may change. In 2016 the succulents used on the topiaries include:

Jade - Both big leaf and little leaf jade are used extensively on topiary shirts, skirts and pants.

Haworthia is used in Maverick's hair.

Rhipsalis is used in the Mariachi Band's hair.

Senecio is used in the Evelyn Cisneros' and in Maria's skirt.

Gollum is used on Evelyn Cisneros' skirt.

Sedum is used on Evelyn Cisneros' hair and Maria's and Loretto's clothing.

Aeonium is used in the flowers on Dorothea's and Maria's dresses.

Crassula rupestris ssp marneriana is used for Don's hair.

Echeveria is used in Dorothea's dress.

Creating and maintaining the topiaries is time consuming and requires great attention to detail. A dedicated docent/volunteer team works on the topiaries every week.

Making a Topiary



The topiaries begin as a wire form supported by a pipe structure.

When the frame is stuffed, volunteers prepare to insert succulent cuttings.



The band members' clothing is being created. The finished band photo is in the Mariachi Band Topiary section.