



raising
your
Standards



PRUNING PLANTS into ornamental shapes is as old as the Roman Empire, when the technique known as topiary is thought to have originated. Topiaries may be formed in any shape, from cubes and cones to dogs and giraffes. Through the ages, topiary has gone in and out of fashion, perhaps peaking in popularity in Europe during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Today, the art of topiary is practiced all around the world, in gardens large and small.

One type of topiary that has enjoyed consistent popularity through the years is the standard. The standard form is a highly stylized version of a tree, consisting of a straight stem topped with a ball or mop of foliage and, in some cases, flowers. In *The Pruning Book*, author Lee Reich writes, “I count myself among standardophiles, and, if I may speak for the group, we like standards for their

This distinctive form of topiary is easy to achieve and adds a classic element to the landscape.

BY RITA PELCZAR

Above: Native to Australia, brush cherry (*Syzygium myrtifolium*) has a columnar habit that makes it well suited to growing as a standard, as shown here in a formal landscape at Meadowbrook Farm in Pennsylvania.

Opposite: ‘Lord Beaconsfield’ fuchsia produces striking red blossoms from early summer to fall on pendent stems.

neatness and because they have the lollipop shape of storybook trees.”

The standard’s relative simplicity makes it an ideal form to begin experimenting with your own topiary creations. Standards can be small-scale—a containerized tabletop centerpiece, for example—or more substantial forms punctuating a border in the landscape.

SELECTING A SUBJECT

The first task in creating a standard is to select a good subject. “There are so many plants that can make good standards, from tropicals to evergreens to flowering shrubs,” says Phil Krach, senior horticulturist at Ladew Topiary Gardens in Monkton, Maryland. Both woody and herbaceous plants can be trained as standards, as long as they are able to produce a straight, sturdy stem or can be grafted onto an understock that provides the up-

right stem. Common plants trained as standards include roses, boxwood, and certain herbs such as rosemary.

Those who grow standards tend to have favorites. “I particularly enjoy working with willows, either for their seasonal foliar effect, or off-season vibrant stem color,” says Dan Benarcik, horticulturist at Chanticleer, a public garden in Wayne, Pennsylvania. Two that he likes for their foliage are: rosemary willow (*Salix elaeagnos*), and silver willow (*S. alba* var. *sericea*); for stem color he likes *S. alba* ‘Britzensis’.

“My personal favorite is our chenille plants (*Acalypha hispida*), with two stems creating a twisted ‘trunk’ (for strength) that we use in the conservatory and in the container displays outdoors during the summer,” says Parker Andes, director of horticulture at the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina. Other favorites at Biltmore include poinsettia, abutilon, “and of course, roses,” adds Andes.

“Examples of tropical standards we will be using at Ladew this year include *Fuchsia*, *Brugmansia*, and *Anisodonteia* [African mallow],” says Krach. He also likes using fine-needled evergreens such as juniper and spruce.

At Filoli Gardens in Woodside, California, “the two best recognized plants trained into standards are wisteria and rosemary,” says Director of Horticulture Jim Salyards. He grows wisteria standards both in the ground and in containers. “In the ground, they are very impactful because of the surprise of form and where they are located,” says Salyards. The in-ground wisteria standards are maintained at about seven feet tall. “In a container, they can be brought into a special space when in bloom, and then moved back to the nursery afterwards,” says Salyards. Vines that develop woody stems can often be trained to a standard form. In addition to wisteria, honeysuckle, grapes, trumpet vine, bougainvillea, allamanda, and some species of mandevilla make dramatic standard specimens. For a selection of plants that lend themselves to training as standards, see the list on page 28.

CREATING STANDARDS

Although hardy plants trained as standards can be grown directly in the ground, most standards are grown in containers. Container-grown standards have several advantages: They can be



Top: This panicle or peegee hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata*) makes an attractive focal point in a bed of mixed perennials. Above, left: Not all standards grow on their own roots. Here a spreading ‘Blue Chip’ juniper has been grafted onto an upright understock to produce a cascade of deep blue-green foliage. Above, right: Designer Martha Bryan pairs a ‘Kiwi Fern’ coleus standard with a mini “hedge” of ‘Minette’ basil.



Regular pruning helps maintain the globular shape of a rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*) standard—and the trimmings can be used in a variety of recipes.

trained before they are moved into the garden, they can be moved out of the garden as their seasonal interest fades, and they can be moved to protected areas, if necessary, over winter.

To grow a standard, select an appropriate plant with a straight stem that has not been pinched. Insert a stake into the pot or ground close to the stem; the above-ground height of the stake should equal the desired height of the stem. Secure the stem to the stake with twine or plant ties.

“Sometimes a plant with a weaker stem—herbs and tropicals—will need to be staked and tied every couple of inches for a few years until the stem gets strong enough to support itself,” says Krach, who adds, “make sure to check the ties regularly and loosen them as the plant grows so the stem doesn’t become girdled.”

Resources

AHS Pruning and Training by Christopher Brickell and David Joyce. DK Publishing, New York, NY, 2011.

The Pruning Book by Lee Reich. Taunton Press, Newtown, CT, 2010.

As the stem grows taller, judiciously remove the lower shoots and leaves. For younger or weaker plants that need all the energy they can get, “you might allow a couple of inches of growth on shoots sprouting low on the main stem,” suggests Reich. On more robust plants, “pinch these shoots back to a single leaf or pair of leaves,” he adds.

When the stem reaches the desired height, pinch back the tip of the main stem to promote branching at that point. As side shoots grow, pinch their first set of leaves, and continue pinching back to promote dense branching. Once you have an established “mop” on your plant, completely remove any remaining shoots lower down on the main stem.

LANDSCAPE USES

The standard lends itself to a formal design, so may not be suited to every garden, but when well placed, it can really make a statement. Places to try them could be by the front door, accenting a patio, or complementing a water feature. At Ladew, “We like to use standards to accent the shape of a garden bed or walkway,” says Krach.

PLANTS FOR STANDARDS

Allamanda spp.
 Angels trumpets (*Brugmansia* spp.)
 Azaleas (*Rhododendron* spp.)
Bougainvillea spp.
 Boxwood (*Buxus* spp.)
 Calamondin orange (×*Citrofortunella microcarpa*)
 Citrus trees (*Citrus* spp.)
 Coleus (*Solenostemon* spp.)
Fuchsia spp.
 Geraniums (*Pelargonium* spp.)
 Heliotrope (*Heliotropium arborescens*)
Hibiscus spp.
 Hollies (*Ilex* spp.)
Hydrangea spp.
 Kumquats (*Fortunella* spp.)
 Lavenders (*Lavandula* spp.)
 Lawson's false cypress (*Chamaecyparis lawsoniana*)
Plectranthus spp.
 Roses (*Rosa* spp.)
 Rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*)
 Sweet bay (*Laurus nobilis*)
Syzygium myrtifolium (syn. *Eugenia myrtifolia*)
 Tree or shrub mallows (*Lavatera* spp.)
 Wax mallow (*Malvaciscus arboreus*)
 Yews (*Taxus* spp.)



Sweet bay (*Laurus nobilis*)



Ivyleaf geranium (*Pelargonium peltatum*) makes an exceptionally graceful standard.

In smaller gardens, standards allow you to pack in even more plants. They “add another, higher layer to a garden bed or container that can be underplanted with another flower or plant,” says Krach. “Like having two plants in one place!” This technique can be applied to home landscapes.

At Filoli, the rosemary, lavender, and germander standards need to be hedged two to three times a year to keep the round balls tight. “In this form, they would make a nice container for a balcony and the leaves could be harvested regularly to keep the form tight,” suggests Salyards.

Although standards are most commonly used as focal points or to add symmetry to a design, Benarcik treats them a bit differently. “I use them as touchstones on a journey through a garden or along a path,

and to create or define space in a garden,” he says. And while standards tend to have a formal feel to them, they can also add an element of whimsy. “I employ them occasionally as if they were guests in a garden space,” says Benarcik, “quietly studying the borders and combinations while the rest of us are absent.”

If you’re ready to try your hand at this ancient art, a little time and effort will yield big results. Simple yet versatile, standards offer endless ways to add impressive accents to your garden.

Rita Pelczar is a contributing editor for The American Gardener. This is an updated version of an article that was published originally in the July/August 2013 issue of this magazine.