

A shear renaissance

Topiaries and sculptured plants are becoming more creative than ever

There's a tremendous variety of sculpted material on the market today, from the traditional Emerald Green arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'Smaragd', left) and shore pine (*Pinus contorta* var. *contorta*, inset) to animal sculptures and hot new items such as spiral gold cone junipers (*Juniperus communis* 'Gold Cone', right).



CURT KIPP



KG FARMS



KG FARMS

By Curt Kipp

Some plants are merely beautiful. A well-shaped topiary or sculptured shrub or tree, however, is a living work of art.

As with any masterpiece, it takes a great deal of time and skill to produce. And in today's economy, there's considerable risk that this investment may not be rewarded. In the minds of some cost-conscious consumers, upscale material has taken a back seat to less expensive and more practical perennials and edibles.

In spite of these factors, some growers report that demand is growing for sculpted material. Among them is David Van Essen, owner of Van Essen Nursery in Lebanon, Ore., who grows a variety of spirals, poodles, pom poms, standards and high grafts.

"The fact they're different is a plus," he said. "It's not just something that goes in. If people are looking to add

just a few plants, they're going to want to add something different from what the neighbor has in their yard."

And why not? There's just no denying the shear creativity (pun intended) many Oregon growers, and their highly skilled employees, are displaying nowadays.

Animal sculptures, iconic shapes and even the letters of the alphabet have taken their place alongside the traditional poodles, globes, pom poms and spirals. One might call it a renaissance of sorts.

"Your imagination can run wild as to what you can find out there now," said Bob Maudlin, a nursery products manager with Eason Horticultural Resources Inc., a plant brokerage firm based in Ft. Wright, Ky.

From big to small

The traditional buyer for sculpted material has been the wealthy homeowner who wanted a formal look for his or her upscale home. Corporate campuses, academic institutions and even horse farms have also been strong candidates to buy large topiaries.

Picks from the PROS

It isn't hard to get growers to talk about plants. The tough part is getting them to narrow down their list of favorites to just a handful. Here are some of the varieties our sources recommended:

Joey Wiseman
Kraemer's Nursery
Mt. Angel, Ore.



Lion's Head Maple
(*Acer palmatum* 'Shishigashira')
– One of the nicest naturally sculpted Japanese maples is the lion's head maple. This small tree looks great

in a container or as a specimen in the landscape. The small, green, uniquely crinkled leaves are densely packed on green stems, creating thick layers that display yellow and orange color late into the fall.



Pieris 'Karenoma'
– This showy evergreen flowering shrub has reddish new foliage which matures to dark green. Winter buds are followed by beautiful white flower clusters in spring, making

a great naturally sculpted plant in the Northwest garden, with year-round interest.

Ken McVicker
Van Essen Nursery Company
Lebanon, Ore.



Corylus 'Contorta'
– A contorted hazelnut, with its twisted branches, gives a unique sculpted look in any garden or patio container.

The best time to enjoy this plant is during the winter and early spring months when it self-decorates with long yellow catkins, creating a striking display.



Boxwoods
(*Buxus* spp.)
– Boxwoods have been the everlasting standard when it comes to utilization of shaped plants in the garden. The versatility provided by the expansive

varietal selection creates a multitude of sales opportunities.



Austrian Pine Pom Pom (*Pinus nigra*) – An Austrian pine in pom pom topiary form is a popular and dramatic plant for larger yards or gardens. This handsome plant looks good all year and tolerates

a wide range of soil conditions. Pom pom plants, displayed in box form, make a very good presentation for a retail garden center.



Grace Smoke Tree (*Cotinus* 'Grace') – Shrinking landscapes call for tighter space trees and patio trees fitting that bill. This *Cotinus* 'Grace' has foliage color and flowers in a neat, clean, tidy package.



Phormium 'Pink Stripe' (New Zealand flax)
– Phormium, having a natural upright architecture, make a great textural accent in any garden. They do well in the landscape and in patio containers,

and the diverse number of color combinations and forms, lend themselves to all occasions.



Pinus mugo 'Valley Cushion' – This TRUdwarf® cultivar from Iseli Nursery makes for a hardy, low-maintenance accent in all types of garden settings. There are many conifers in

this niche category that create value added opportunities when presenting landscape designs to customers.

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These sulphur spray juniper pom poms (*Juniperus x media* 'Sulphur Spray') are among the smaller offerings at D & M Nursery at 15 gallons.

Marjorie Clemmens, owner of D & M Nursery in Canby, Ore., has been growing large sculpted material, in 25 gallon containers and up, since the 1970s. Most of it has been shipped to the East Coast, where this look is more popular.

"People want ready landscapes," Clemmens said. "They want it looking like it's been there five, six, seven years. They don't want to sit there and wait. They want it right now. It's the American way."

Most of her plants are arborvitae, junipers or boxwoods – some as large as 95 gallons. In order to trim many of them, one must stand on a ladder.

Robert Hunnicutt of Pine Art Growers in Scappoose, Ore., also grows large topiaries, but his selection is narrower. He offers four pine taxa: *Pinus virginiana* 'Wate's Golden', Japanese black pine (*Pinus thunbergii*), Tanyosho pine (*Pinus densiflora* 'Umbraculifera') and shore pine (*Pinus contorta* var. *contorta*).

It takes work and time to grow the plants – seven years or more. Then, when it's harvest time, all material is hand dug, balled and burlapped. A laborer starts digging wide with a shovel and works his way in until he starts

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Hunnicutt's larger trees fit one to a flatbed semi, and sometimes he has to construct a canopy to fit over the tree. Buyers have included Emerald Downs racetrack in Auburn, Wash. and Lan Su Chinese Garden in Portland, Ore. With housing construction at a near standstill, Hunnicutt's sales have slowed considerably, but he recently sold 20 trees to an attorney in Minneapolis who owns an estate home.

"The average bear is not going to do that," he said.

Over the years, as growers like Hunnicutt stuck with large topiaries,



34 ► Bountiful Farms in Woodburn, Ore., creates these sculpted junipers in shapes suitable for a charm bracelet. They are available in containers as a #1.



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This blossom-like design is among the topiary shapes offered by Bountiful Farms in Woodburn, Ore.

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others growers started offering sculpted material in smaller sizes for the average consumer living in a smaller home or townhouse. The 4-6 foot spiral arborvitae or juniper has become nearly ubiquitous, as has the poodled cypress, the pine on a standard, and many others.

The number of growers offering these is too large to count. The next trend may be growers offering sculpted material in even smaller sizes, from a #3 pot down to a #1.

"The biggest drawback when we got into this kind of plant is that they were large plants, they were cumbersome, they were hard to dig and they were hard to move," Maudlin said. "Now, you can get them as small as a #1 container. You can pick them up and move them yourself. ... As they've gotten smaller we can stack other plants around them (on a shipment) and the delivered cost has come down rather drastically for these plants."

The plant menagerie

Many sources interviewed for this article agreed that Bountiful Farms in Woodburn, Ore. is one of the preeminent growers of cutting-edge, sculpted material.

"One of the things we're trying to do is keep up with new ideas and stay ahead of the curve," company co-owner Brent Nelson said.

A glance at the company's Web site (www.bountiful-farms.com) reveals a collection of animal-shaped junipers and arborvitae to rival the real animal collection at the San Diego Zoo. Elephants, deer, gazelles, llamas, giraffes, horses, eagles, fish, bulls, rams, elk, bears, cougars, dinosaurs, penguins, rhinoceroses, seahorses – no kidding. All of these are grown, sculpted and sold by Bountiful.

It should be noted that, with more than 500 acres in nursery production, Bountiful is far from being a specialty grower. Topiary material makes up only about 1 percent of the company's offerings. Still, it's the kind of material that catches eyes and turns heads at trade shows, in catalogues and on nursery tours.

"I think what Bountiful Farms is doing with some of their new things is great," said Mike Pezzillo, a nursery manager with McHutchison Co., a plant broker based in Wayne, N.J. He is particularly impressed with Bountiful's

sculpted material that becomes functional in outdoor living spaces.

“They’re doing natural umbrellas made out of birch and cedar and wisteria,” he said. “I think they’re fantastic. It’s basically living lawn furniture – something you can put a table and chairs underneath. They’ve also created some archways out of weeping cherry and cedar.”

If you want something more affordable, Bountiful has that covered as well. They are among the growers Maudlin mentioned who offer material as small as one gallon. The shapes wouldn’t be out of place on a charm bracelet – stars, cactuses, suns, moons, crosses, angels and even a Christmas tree shape like one might find in a coloring book.

Bullish on sculptured material

Kraemer’s Nursery is one of the growers that’s bullish on sculptured material. Based in Mt. Angel, Ore., this still-growing success story has become one of Oregon’s larger growers, with more than 800 acres in production. It plans to dedicate more of its production to sculpted material.

“It’s a category that seems to be growing,” said Barry Gregory, vice president of sales and marketing. “It’s certainly growing for Kraemer’s. We haven’t hit anywhere near our saturation point. We’re going to keep upping the numbers until we see the stuff sitting here too long.”

According to Gregory, both independent garden centers and big box stores are demanding more sculpted material. “It seems to be a product mix that all customer channels are using,” he said. “Independents are looking for more of the new and the different. Big boxes want that too, but they want more of the tried and true topiaries – the Alberta (spruces) and the spiral junipers.”

The appeal to the consumer is the instant beauty. “A lot of people use

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Kraemer's Nursery in Mt. Angel, Ore., is dedicating more of its production capacity to sculpted material, such as this Austrian pine pom pom (*Pinus nigra*).

them to decorate their patios and front porches," Gregory said.

In response to this market demand, Kraemer's is growing a wider variety of sculpted material, and not just conifers.

"We're increasing virtually everything and adding quite a few things to the mix," he said. "We currently are doing some spirals, both junipers and Alberta spruce. We do patio trees and globe spruce too. We're adding in a fair amount of deciduous material, including flowering material, hibiscus and lilacs. We're also doing some willows that have a variegated foliage."

Joey Wiseman, a product line manager for the company, said smaller sizes are also part of the discussion at Kraemer's. "I have heard some people talk about doing a 1-gallon juniper spiral," she said. "That's something we may investigate."

Van Essen Nursery is another grower bullish on sculpted material. According to owner David Van Essen, sculpted material complements the grower's premium shrubs and other distinctive offerings.

"We see that this works with the clientele we have," Van Essen said. "They already buy the Proven Winner ColorChoice® shrubs we have and the Ball patented products. They're looking for something else new and unusual and this fits right in with that."

KG Farms in Woodburn, Ore. also grows sculpted material because it is a good complement to its main offerings.

"We started doing emerald spirals because customers were asking," co-owner Greg Wilmes said. "Then we started doing (spiral) gold cones (*Juniperus communis* 'Gold Cone'). And then sometimes we do unique topiaries."

Pezzillo, with McHutchison Corp., praised the 'Gold Cone' spiral junipers as a strong marketplace performer. "It's a hit," he said. "It sells. We can't get enough of those."

According to Wilmes, it's a head turner. "It brings out the yellows and greens from the sun side to the shaded side," he said. "It gives a different look

from both sides of the plant. It's pretty catchy when we're giving tours."

KG has also started growing a blue juniper and a *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Cyanoviridis' pom pom. If these are well received by customers, they'll grow more.

According to Maudlin, it makes sense that broad-based growers would get into topiaries more. They are good "order starters," he said – something that will get the attention of buyers and serve as a foundation to build an order. They're also a good add-on to orders.

The larger and the more unusual topiary offerings are a good way for the independent garden center to set itself apart from mass market chain stores, Maudlin said. When it comes to sculpted material, big boxes are interested, but they are more conservative in their offerings.

A large investment

Before growers make their move into sculpted shrubs and trees, they need to realize what it takes to grow the material. The first requirement is skill, or more specifically, skilled employees.

"It takes a special talent to be able to prune a nice plant," KG's Wilmes said.

Wilmes often has his employees work on sculpted material during gaps in the work schedule. Here is where their creativity with shapes can come into play "The guys see what they can do that might sell, and we'll show buyers on their tours," he said. "If your customer sees it in the field and likes it, it can sell."

The second requirement is time.

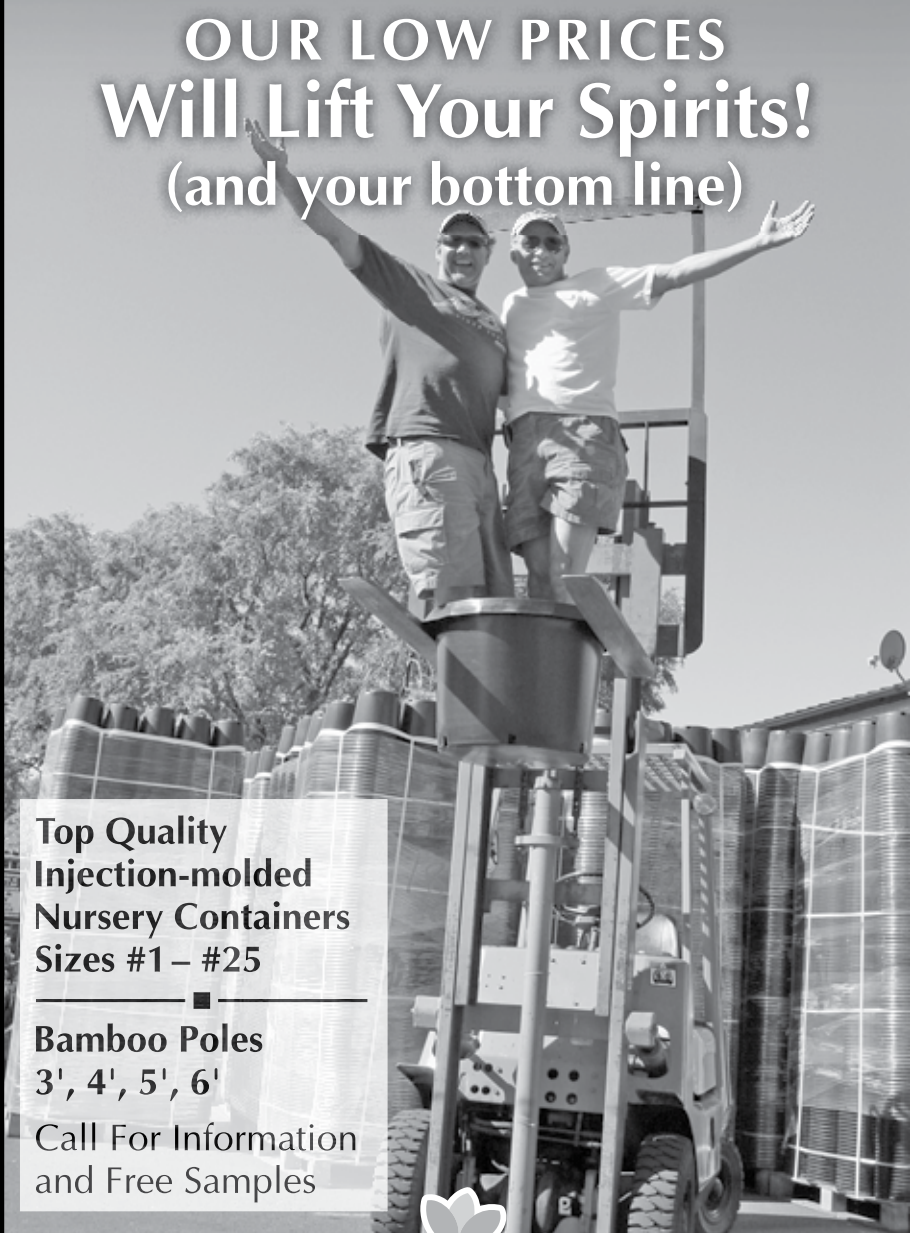
"Once you pick a plant to spiral, it'll take a fair amount of time to shape it, and then you'll be trimming it lightly a couple of times a year until you sell it," Wilmes said.

According to Gregory of Kraemer's Nursery, one should expect it will take one additional year to produce the same plant in a sculptured form.



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This tiered shape is popular for sculpted conifers. These emerald green arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'Smaragd') are being grown by Kraemer's Nursery.

"The majority of this stuff takes years and years to produce a good product," Gregory said. "You can't just shape a bunch of stuff and haul it to the dock. You have to take your time."

The time issue is not insignificant. Many of the cultivars that are frequently shaped into topiaries are notoriously slow growers in the first place.

From the perspective of Pezzillo, the New Jersey-based plant broker with McHutchison, Inc., Oregon is a fantastic source for this kind of material.

"There's not a shortage of nurseries that are doing a really good job of topiaries and sculptured plants in Oregon," he said. "Most do an exceptional job. For creativity, Bountiful Farms still seems to lead the path, but for quality, name your nursery. Russell's Nursery, A&R Spada Farms, KG Farms, Colony Nursery, Woodburn Nursery, Fairdale Nursery, Bizon Nursery, Park's Nursery – they all do a good job." ☺

Curt Kipp is the publications manager for the Oregon Association of Nurseries, and the managing editor of Digger magazine. He can be reached by e-mail at ckipp@oan.org. He has a blog at www.diggermag.blogspot.com and a Twitter feed at www.twitter.com/diggermag.