

GUARDING THE GARDEN

Dog topiaries available in 33 breeds

Teresa Bennett's two standard poodles are sometimes jealous of the animal-shaped topiaries she creates.

"They're jealous because the topiaries are getting the attention and they aren't," she says, laughing.

The topiaries not only draw attention from people but also from canines. At one farmer's market where Bennett was displaying her work, a schnauzer stared down a cocker spaniel topiary for several minutes.

Bennett started creating topiaries when she worked part time for a small nursery in the Hampton Roads area. The nursery carried topiaries and frames featuring 33 different breeds of dogs.

"They are very accurate representations," she says.

When the nursery closed in July 2010, she decided to continue making the canine topiaries. "I thought there would be interest in those, particularly at dog shows," she says. "No one around here was carrying those frames."

The topiaries were well received at the dog shows she visited in Virginia. This year she will expand her show schedule to also include North Carolina and Maryland.

After seeing the success of the topiaries, Bennett began displaying them at farmer's markets in the Hampton Roads area. "Farmer's markets have done well for me," she says.

Bennett's interest in gardening developed during her childhood. Her grandparents were farmers and often grew flowers. "I've admired what they grew," Bennett says. "My grandmother always had me out helping in her rose gardens. Gardening was always in my background."

Bennett didn't get her master gardener training until 2001. "The more I read about gardens the more information I found so conflicting," she says. "I wanted to go through master gardening to have research-based information. I wanted to grow pretty flowers."

She now uses her training to create the topiaries she sells. Her topiaries range in size from small bullfrogs to a life-size giraffe. A mid-size topiary such as a rabbit takes her up to two and a half hours to stuff and plant. "When I get into the larger ones, they can take a day to stuff," she says.

Her most popular topiaries are dogs — poodles lead the pack. Other favorites include turtles, frogs, rabbits and cats. Prices start at \$40 for a small topiary, \$70 to \$125 for medium and more than \$300 for the largest.

To make her topiaries lifelike, Bennett uses plant materials that resemble the specific animals. For example, she uses dwarf



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mondo grass for the top knot and tail of a poodle. On a dolphin she plants gray sedums that resemble the skin. "That is where it gets fun," she says. "The closer I can get them to look like the actual animal the more I enjoy it."

Bennett grows her own plants — different kinds of sedums and grown covers — in her backyard. "I order plugs from nurseries so I can grow out the yard," she says. Her plants grow directly in the moss, which acts as soil. "Sedum will send out roots where it touches," she explains. "It will continue to grow to cover the frame."

Bennett has more than 130 different frames to choose from. "I have had a couple of people want frames that look like they had been in the yard for years," she says. "I had to plant them heavily with plants. I usually cover one-fourth with plant material. I try not to cover it completely."

Poodle, flamingo and heron frames are three of her personal favorites. "For the flamingos I use pink-leaved sedum that looks cool in the frame," she says. "I like doing the heron frames because I can use plants with gray tint."

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