

Art Alive

Margee Rader is sculpting succulent topiaries that are creating a new sensation

By Debra Lee Baldwin
June 19, 2005

Topiary has taken a new twist.

It used to mean shrubs sheared into pom-poms and spirals, or (at theme parks) elephants and ball-balancing seals. Like bonsai, topiary was an unhurried art. It takes years for boxwood, privet and junipers to become living sculptures.

Back in the '80s, Pat Hammer, owner of Samia Rose Topiary in Leucadia and author of "The New Topiary," pioneered a much faster approach. She stuffed wire sculptures of animals with sphagnum moss, planted ivy in the moss, then trained the ivy to cover the form.

Today, Hammer continues to create fanciful and often immense ivy sculptures, which are leafy and lush and take mere weeks to make. (Her work currently is on display at the Flower Show at the San Diego County Fair, now through July 4.)

On a somewhat parallel track, during the '90s, Teddy Colbert of Somis, Calif., came up with a method similar to Hammer's, except Colbert made "living wreaths" and used succulents instead of ivy. Before she passed away in 2001, Colbert sold her concept and wreath kits to Euro-American Propagators, a large wholesale nursery in Bonsall.

Since then, Margee (pronounced with a hard "g") Rader, sister of Euro-American's founder and CEO John Rader, has blended Hammer's and Colbert's ideas into a new type of topiary: moss-stuffed wire sculptures planted with colorful, textural succulent plants.

Kissing balls

Margee Rader grew up in Chula Vista, and lived in Utah and Northern California before returning to San Diego. Three years ago, she went to work for her brother as a nanny for his kids, and soon became captivated with Euro-American's extensive selection of succulents.



DEBRA LEE BALDWIN

Margee Rader's innovative succulent topiaries include everything from living wreaths to one-of-a-kind creations like this chair. Recent garden show exhibits have included a topiary terrier modeled after her Yorkshire terrier, Chaucer.

- [Making and caring for a fun succulent topiary](#)
- [Margee's plant palette can make patterns pop](#)

"I used to prefer old-fashioned flowers from Grandma's garden," she says, "until I realized succulents are as nice as any plant, and their leaves and flowers come in beautiful colors."

Euro-American needed a manager for its succulent division, so Rader stepped in. At first, she created wreaths using Colbert's method and marketed wreath-making kits. These included a wire frame filled with soil and moss, florists' pins to hold cuttings in place, long-handled tweezers and unrooted cuttings.

But Rader soon discovered the demand was greater for finished wreaths, so Euro-American discontinued the kits. Then, "because I had to come up with something different," she introduced succulent orbs, also called "kissing balls," because they hang overhead and, with a little imagination, suggest mistletoe. At \$55 for an 8-inch-diameter orb and \$75 for a 10-inch, these are among the most affordable items in a line that includes topiary telephones, teacups, pigs and more.



DEBRA LEE BALDWIN

"I used to prefer old-fashioned flowers from Grandma's garden until I realized succulents are as nice as any plant," says topiary designer Margee Rader.

Matching handbag

Rader assembles items in her line, as well as custom orders, with the help of three assistants beneath shade cloth in an open-air work area at Euro-American. Succulent topiaries are expensive because they're labor intensive, she explains. Consequently, her clientele is high-end.

The new Wynn Las Vegas resort recently ordered succulent topiaries in bold and dramatic geometric shapes. They're on display in the VIP tower, Rader says, in the guest registration area. Included among the 36 pieces are small orbs, 8 or 20 inches in diameter; cubes from 12 to 20 inches; and two obelisk towers each 44 inches high. She connected with the resort through a sales rep who shows her line to big hotels. She has another rep who takes them to stores.

Euro-American ships her creations nationwide.

"I do most of my business outside the San Diego area," she says. "People in the East love succulent topiaries, because succulents grow mostly indoors there."

She also has had an excellent response from Los Angeles. After setting up shop at a few garden shows in that city, Rader says, "word got out, so now everyone wants me to come."

Like a fashion designer, she did a "trunk show" for Nordstrom. The three items she created – which were sold at Nordstrom locations in San Diego, Arizona and Nevada – are approximately life-sized and, like all items in her line, consist of wire frames stuffed with moss.

A topiary purse has a strap covered in rosea ice plant and a (faux) front flap outlined in burgundy-red Dragon's blood sedum. A broad-brimmed hat consists of frilly, rosette-shaped sedums, and a matching high-heeled ladies' shoe is fetchingly embellished with a bow of String of Pearls (*Senecio rowleyanus*).

Topiary terriers

Rader's Yorkshire terrier, Chaucer, inspired her to create a topiary terrier. It has a muzzle of green echeveria florets, a body of fluffy mixed succulents, legs of overlapping jade plant, and ears and tail of *Sedum acre*, a fine-leaved ground cover that resembles green yarn.

Encouraged by the response to her "Chaucer" topiary, which she displayed at last year's San Diego County Fair in the fresh-cut flower area, she began experimenting with other animal-shaped wire forms. Her source was Samia Rose, and Hammer, who has created topiaries for venues nationwide, suggested they collaborate on a display for the 2005 Spring Flower & Garden Show.

Their work included a life-sized ivy topiary woman painting al fresco in her garden, accompanied by her topiary dog, near succulent-upholstered metal patio furniture (which Rader gleaned from second-hand stores). One "painting" depicted a vase, using succulents with contrasting leaves, which Rader arranged within a standard wood picture frame.

Their display garnered five design awards.

Beach scene

If you missed the spring show, you have another chance this summer. For the Paul Ecke Jr. Flower and Garden Show at this year's San Diego County Fair, Rader has created a whimsical, eye-catching display that ties in with the fair's "Cinema Summer" theme.

"My inspiration was the movie 'Some Like it Hot,' starring Marilyn Monroe and Tony Curtis," she says. "It's especially appropriate for San Diego, because all of the movie's resort scenes were filmed at the Hotel del Coronado."

To suggest the look of an old-time movie theater, Rader chose as a backdrop an off-white curtain. On the curtain are posters from the 1959 movie. Seaside-themed topiaries include a big beach ball, and an umbrella inspired by one depicted in the posters.

The exhibit's palette emphasizes oranges, reds and yellows. "I wanted to use a lot of hot, sunny colors, in keeping with a summer day at the beach," Rader says.

She not only chose succulents with colorful leaves, but she also spiced up the exhibit with eye-catching selections from Euro-American's Proven Winners line of bedding plants. Among them are variegated euphorbias, ornamental grasses, hostas and an orange-blooming *Cuphea* appropriately named Caribbean Sunset.

There's really no limit to what might be done with succulent topiaries, Rader adds. Just as Hammer has done with ivy topiaries, there's the possibility of creating succulent hippos, dragons, sea creatures and more – and presenting them at shows (or making them for clients) from coast to coast.

So, should you run across a succulent topiary on your travels, keep in mind the concept originated right here in San Diego.



DEBRA LEE BALDWIN

To make a succulent topiary, Rader carefully inserts hundreds of cuttings into spagnum moss wrapped and stuffed into a wire frame.

■Debra Lee Baldwin is a North County-based freelance writer. Her book, "Landscaping with Succulents," will be released in 2006 by Timber Press.



SCOTT LINNETT / Union-Tribune

"Some Like It Hot" was the inspiration for the beach scene Margee Rader designer for the San Diego County Fair. The display with a succulent topiary umbrella, chaise and beach ball was honored for best small landscape.



NADIA BOROWSKI SCOTT / Union-Tribune

Working with Pat Hammer of Samia Rose Topiary, Margee Rader created succulent paintings and furnishings for an award-winning display garden at the Spring Home / Garden Show at the Del Mar Fairgrounds.



DEBRA LEE BALDWIN

Among Margee Rader's most popular designs is a purse made of succulents.