We’re all mad here for “Imaginary Worlds: Alice in Wonderland” now until October 27, 2019 at the Atlanta Botanical Garden. The White Rabbit is simply stunning at more than 27 feet tall, and floating inside an upside-down umbrella in the Skyline Garden pond. On the Skyline lawn is a grandmaster’s chess board surrounded by nine heart “trees” each more than 12 feet tall. You can find Alice sleeping near the Cheshire Cat. The designers fashioned her white blouse from dichondra and her blonde hair from creeping Jenny, but her blue pinafore was a color challenge resolved by dyeing moss.

The joy and wonder of this exhibition for me is both an acknowledgment of its beauty and the utter impossibility of creating these giant topiary-like sculptures. 

(But sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast). For one can only do impossible things once you recognize the importance of imagination.
The exhibition’s creators, Mosaïcultures Internationales de Montréal (MIM) are a team of landscape architects, engineers, horticultural mosaic artists and sculptor-welders who designed the beauty, feelings, imagery and textures of Alice’s Wonderland with 31 steel forms and plant palettes.

Once created by the team in Canada, the forms were shipped to Buford where the Garden’s horticulturists began stuffing and planting sections of the sculptures beginning this past January. The soil was first set into place, a fabric was added and plants were planted from top to bottom. They worked inside greenhouses in Buford before trucking the sections of the sculptures to the Midtown garden in April.

The sculptures are frequently watered and fertilized throughout the growing season by the ABG team. Underneath the mesh, a network of irrigation channels also supply water to the plants on the surface, helping them grow. The plants are sheared and kept in a very tight growing
pattern. Most of the plants used to create these sculptures are colorful summer annuals.

EXHIBIT “Imaginary Worlds: Alice in Wonderland”
Atlanta Botanical Garden
9 a.m.-7 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, May 11-Oct. 27. $18.95-$21.95.
1345 Piedmont Ave. NE, Atlanta. 404-876-5859. atlantabg.org.

_Curiouser and curiouser_. My visit to Imaginary Worlds started me thinking about the world of topiary beyond mosaiculture. Could I really work dwarf trees, shrubs or herbs into animal forms or into geometrical shapes? All shapes are fair game, with designs as simple as balls and boxes to more artistic shapes. If you can imagine it, you can make it! To get started, all that is required is to find the right plant, the correct tools, and a passion for gardening and art.

**Plant Selection:**

Generally speaking, you'll want to choose an evergreen plant (including the broadleaf type). The best topiary plants among trees, shrubs and herbs bear small leaves, like to be sheared, grow quickly, and have a dense branching pattern. Here is a list of favorites:

- Dwarf Alberta Spruce Tree
- Arborvitae
- Boxwoods
- Cherry Laurel
- English Ivy
- Japanese Holly
- Juniper
- Lavender
- Myrtle
- Privet
- Rosemary
- Yews
Tools of the Topiary Trade:

- Patience enough to try the patience of an oyster, and a good eye.
- Metal forms/frames/wooden canes.
- Small pruning shears, snips and secateurs. (These are used for trimming, pruning out small branches, and pruning out branches in the center of the topiary that are hard to reach and require a careful touch).
- Long-handled clipping tools for shrub topiary include hedge shears (used to trim larger areas and flat spaces that don't need as much precision or delicate handling), and electric or gas-powered clippers. Make sure they are comfortable in your hands and are not too heavy for use over long periods of time.
- Twine, sphagnum moss and Japanese bonsai garden scissors for indoor or small topiaries.

Artistic Designs:

Sculpting topiary is a slow and steady process, with plants trimmed often, but sparingly. Start topiaries very early in the growing cycle so that bare branches callus and require less maintenance in your garden. Topiary is multi-dimensional, so as you trim, view from all sides.

- So if you are new to topiary, you’ll want to use a topiary metal form over the shrub you choose to sculpt. As the plant grows, the form will help guide you on pruning decisions. Even experienced topiary artists use forms for their topiary. If you are working on a small shrub, prune no more than one inch off in places where you need to fill in. Pruning encourages additional, bushier growth. If you’re working on a large shrub, take no more than three inches off in areas where you wish to cut back.

- For a spiral juniper, wait until the plant reaches four feet tall before cutting the initial spiral pattern into the plant. Begin at the base and
take three turns upward to the right – never to the left – for a more consistent look.

- Consider edging a gravel path with clipped topiary balls or boxwoods.

- Build a knot garden, an intricately designed garden in a square frame with aromatic plants and culinary herbs arranged to create an interlacing pattern, sometimes with fanciful topiary and carefully tended paths.

- Design a Hedge Maze, one of the oldest forms of topiary art constructed from evergreen herbs or dwarf boxwoods. Hedge mazes evolved from the knot gardens of Renaissance Europe, and were first constructed during the mid-16th century.

- Make use of a fast-growing vine plant such as English ivy and a metal frame (in the shape of your choice). First fill the form with sphagnum moss (to help your topiary take on a fuller look), then attach the vine to the frame, and let it grow to fill in the shape. Then simply remove the stray growth.

- Lavender or rosemary can be grown as a small indoor topiary plant. It's especially favored by those seeking a pleasant aroma. Once you trim your topiary into your favorite shape, use the cuttings in potpourri.

Consider topiary art for your next gardening project. You’ll be glad you did. Until next time, *if you don’t know where you are going, any road can take you there.*

*Credit to the wonderful words of Lewis Carroll, “Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland”.*
A special salute to Gail Berthe, the Happy Gardener and past editor of the Horticulture Edition. I am honored to follow in your footsteps.

Be Well,

Linda Doiron

The Hokey Gardener