

# KNOT GARDENS

M. Richards



## f ILOLI GARDENER'S REFERENCE

*Knot gardens are thought to have their origins in ancient Arabian gardens, but are more commonly associated with European gardens of the Middle Ages and Elizabethan England, where lords enjoyed their colors and*

*patterns from castle windows. Knot gardens were commonly designed to display royal coats of arms, figures of plants or animals, or stitches of embroidery, and the interstices would be filled with colored sand and earth (open knot, as at Filoli) or with flowers (closed knot). While knot gardens are traditionally composed of flat hedges, Filoli's has a different look; hedges are shorn and sculpted into three-dimensional under- and overlapping woven strands, making their maintenance more challenging, but also creating a beautiful, intricate, undulating effect.*

### **Knots at Filoli**

Filoli's knot gardens were designed, donated and installed in 1976 by the Woodside-Atherton Garden Club. Judy Talbot designed the knots, and Sally MacBride oversaw plant selection and planting. Each knot is 36 feet square, and plants were placed on one-foot centers using string lines as pattern guides.

Their location in the panel gardens—bordered to the north and south by hedges of rose-of-sharon (*Hibiscus syriacus*) and copper beech (*Fagus sylvatica* Atropurpurea Group)—was formerly planted with gypsophila and delphinium as a part of the cutting gardens. This site was chosen because of the minimal impact the knots would have on the design of the panel gardens. In a tradition reminiscent of the area's original purpose, lavender flowers are cut in early to mid-summer and used to make potpourri for

sale at Filoli's garden shop.

The hedges in the knot gardens were chosen for the contrasting colors and fine textures of their foliage, their showy blossoms and, very importantly, their similar rates of growth. The original plant selection has been modified slightly because differences in plants' growth rates made it difficult to maintain the hedges in scale with one-another and because the hedges were too close together to maintain.

- Lavandula angustifolia* 'Hidcote' – English Lavender
- Berberis thunbergii* 'Crimson Pygmy' – Japanese Barberry
- Ballota pseudodictamnus* - Woolly Horehound
- Teucrium chamaedrys* - Germander
- Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Tuscan Blue' – Rosemary (topiary standards)
- Berberis thunbergii* 'Crimson Pygmy' - Japanese Barberry
- Santolina chamaecyparissus* var. *nana* – Dwarf Lavender Cotton
- Teucrium chamaedrys* – Germander
- Myrtus communis* ssp *tarentina* 'Compacta' – Dwarf Myrtle

JAN	
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MAR	MULCH
APR	
MAY	PEAK BLOOM
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AUG	PRUNE / SHEAR
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Knot hedges are now grown from cuttings for the greatest uniformity of growth.

### Maintenance

Filoli's knot gardens follow a standard formula of maintenance, but require a skilled eye to hedge the knots into their undulating, woven pattern. Weeding is a constant chore in the open knots, and is eased by applying a two-inch mulch of nitrified redwood sawdust once per year.

Knots are watered with overhead irrigation once per week in the summer, and less often for the rest of the year. Lime and fertilizer are applied in late fall or winter at rates determined by regular soil tests; adequate water and fertilization are important in a planting with considerable root competition.

Uniform applications of both encourage hedges to put on even amounts of new growth and to maintain the character of the knot between hedging. Knots are hedged hard in mid-to late summer, after plants have bloomed. To maintain their size, hedges must be renovated approximately every five years. Lavender and Santolina, which don't sprout readily from old wood, are replaced during renovation.

### Miniatures

In 1991, Mrs. Duncan Low—a garden volunteer and member of the Woodside Atherton Garden Club—had the idea to create miniature versions of the original knots. Filoli's maintenance staff built two 36" square boxes and engraved the sides to represent the brick

pattern of the garden's walls. Each box took four hours to plant, with dwarf hedges spaced at one inch on center. These boxed gardens, which are now on display across from their full-scale counterparts, were displayed in the Garden Club of America's flower show in 1992 at Gumps in San Francisco. The lead horticulturist of the panel gardens keeps an eye on the water needs of these plants, and volunteers are in charge of their weekly

pruning with bonsai shears; Patsy Low was the first volunteer to maintain the miniatures, and others have since taken over that detailed task.



### Miniature knot plantings:

- Teucrium marum* Cat Thyme (gray foliage)
- Myrtus communis ssp tarentina* 'Compacta' – Dwarf Myrtle (topiary)
- Teucrium chamaedrys* – Germander (green)
- Leptospermum scoparium* (Nanum group) 'Kiwi' - Tea Tree (red)
- Buxus microphylla var. japonica* 'Morris Midget' – Small-leaved Box (yellow-green)



### References & Further Reading:

- Jackson-Stops, G., and Pipkin, J. (1987). *The Country House Garden*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.
- Whalley, R. and Jennings, A. (2006). *Knot Gardens and Parterres*. Barn Elms Publishing.

*Filoli Gardener's Reference sheets are created by garden staff to answer common questions regarding Filoli's traditional horticultural practices. This sheet may be accessed from the Filoli website.*

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