

Seeds of imagination

by Andy Cingolani

From up close, the structure before me is random in appearance: metal rods, coated in chocolate-brown paint, bowed into sweeping curves—some bending into circles three feet across, others the size of dinner plates—then welded back into the structure. Clearly, this is a sculpture of something conceptual and abstract, but as I continue staring at it, order starts to present itself. The large rounded belly. The duck bill. The sailor's cap.

It's Donald Duck, Mickey's adorably cantankerous sidekick, rendered in metal framing, standing about eight feet tall. By March, this frame will sit inside one of the world-famous topiaries at the *Epcot*® International Flower & Garden Festival. No, though, it's just a duck-shaped jumble of curved rods that doesn't show any of the personality Donald Duck is known for... yet.

"This festival is all about displays," says Eric Darden, Horticulture Manager for the *Epcot*® International Flower & Garden Festival. "If we're doing our job, *Epcot*® always looks pretty good. Our challenge is putting enough stuff in so that our Guests, especially Guests who come quite a bit, see things that make them go, 'Wow!' A hundred colorful topiaries can do that."

The next step for the Donald Duck topiary is an irrigation system. Workers position rubber tubing designed to drop water throughout the structure, using a system that Darden says has evolved over years. "At one time, we didn't irrigate the topiaries," he says. "But we didn't have as many of them and they were smaller. It wasn't a problem to get enough people to hand water them all."

As the size and number of the topiaries has grown, however, a different method for keeping topiaries properly watered became a necessity. "It can get a little complex. Some parts of Donald Duck, like the arms, the bill and the tip of this tail, are going to want to dry out quickly, while the body will stay soaked. So you can use more tubing in these areas that dry out faster. You have different zones, kind of like your yard."

After the irrigation system is in place, sphagnum moss is packed into a four-inch gap between outer and inner metal framing, providing a substance for the variegated creeping fig, green creeping fig, and Joseph's Coat to root into. Once the plants have rooted well, Cast Members deliver the topiaries to *Epcot*® backstage, ready to be positioned in the Park.

Darden is part of a team of about 500 Cast Members in the horticulture field at *Walt Disney World*® Resort, and with over 100 topiaries and vast floral and plant displays, all of them are called into service during the Festival. He says that, while horticultural skill is essential, it's not necessarily the most important quality for this type of work. "This is as much art as it is horticulture," he says, standing in front of a Captain Hook topiary that is nearing completion. "When you find the people who are good at this, it's not necessarily the best gardeners. It's the people who have an artistic touch. You just never know who's going to have the right touch."

In addition to Donald Duck, there are dozens of Disney Character topiaries in production, including Peter Pan, Pumbaa and Rafiki from *The Lion King*, and the dancing mushrooms from *Fantasia*. In fact, many of the displays feature several characters from a classic Disney film re-creating a timeless movie or cartoon scene. This year, the feature topiary display at the *Epcot*® entrance will depict a 14-foot-tall Goofy in an angler's hat, holding a fly rod that's hooked cartoonishly into the seat of his pants. Behind him, Pluto will emerge from a pup tent while Donald and Daisy sit around a campfire roasting marshmallows.

"One of the really cool things about this job is that it's Disney," Darden says, standing by a six-foot butterfly filled with sphagnum. "Impatiens are a common landscaping flower, but we get to plant them to make a colorful butterfly. If I were a landscape manager and I wanted to show you my impatiens, I'd take you to a median in a road. Here, I get to show you a butterfly."

"Plus, this is the only place you can see Disney Character topiaries," he adds. "You can see floral displays and floating gardens and butterfly houses in other places. You're just not going to see a 14-foot-tall Goofy with a fishing pole hooked on his pants anywhere but here."

Tips from the Disney Pros

Heather Will-Browne, who has been a Disney horticulturist for 35 years, has a few tips you can use at home.

Feed. Feed. Feed.

Use a time-release feed every couple of months to keep plants healthy and liquid feed to make them dazzle!

Stay in season.

Make sure your plants are appropriate for the time of year. "I feel so bad when I see a cart loaded with petunias and we're headed into June. I know they won't last."

A trick for hanging baskets.

Hang baskets from a 100-pound fishing swivel, and turn it every so often. "The plant won't stretch toward the light and get out of balance. It also makes it easier to trim evenly."