

Pat Hammer: Topiary and So Much More

By Lucy Warren

No single title could possibly describe Patricia Riley Hammer's storied career and her multiple contributions to horticulture—and, for the past three decades, to San Diego. Pat is horticulturist, artist, author, lecturer, educator, shop owner, business woman, and administrator. A plantswoman extraordinaire, she connects people to plants.

When she was five years old, Pat's passion for plants was ignited by a field of bachelor buttons of all colors. She picked so many to take home that she couldn't carry them all. Her first actual plant collection originated with cactus, begun while she was studying horticulture in college in New Jersey, not exactly a desert environment.

After graduating college she worked as a propagator for Koster Nursery, part of Seabrook Farms, in New Jersey. Soon after, she moved to Pennsylvania, and worked in propagation for a florist where flowers and vegetables grew in on-site greenhouses. There she met an avid gardener, Mrs. Grace Jackson, the wife of a dairy farmer and mother of five children. Grace's garden provided Pat a model for the ideal garden.

Later, while raising her own two boys, Pat and her husband bought an 18-acre property where she strived to replicate Grace's garden, complete with orchard, vegetables, berries, flowers, and herbs of all types. Pat's home garden today still abounds with fruits and vegetables.

Pennsylvania: Longwood Gardens

The first major listing on Pat's resume is her 15-year tenure as Senior Gardener at Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. Longwood greatly expanded her world of plants and horticulture. Originally the home of Pierre S. Dupont, the Gardens encompass over one thousand acres of multiple themed and seasonal gardens. In an elite culture, dominated by men, she soon established her credentials—creating magnificent displays and public events, working with professionals and the public alike.

When she decided to create topiary figures for the Children's Garden at Longwood, she found information on the subject to be scant and outdated. Approaching management, she was given permission to research the topic and build a unique topiary display. Which then led to writing a book on the subject! Calling on experts throughout the world and incorporating experimental techniques attempted at the garden, she wrote *The New Topiary: Imaginative Techniques from Longwood Gardens*. The book was first published in 1991 and is unsurpassed as a topiary reference to this day. Going beyond the traditional pruned topiary created in estate gardens, she also wrote about creating portable topiary, growing in pots and on frames, with clear instructions for construction. With the new techniques she promoted and demonstrated at Longwood, demand for living topiary flourished.

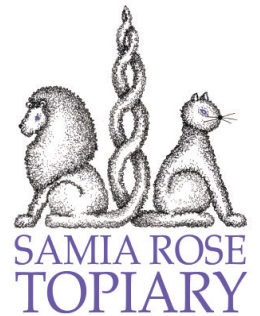


Photos: Rachel Cobb

The Samia Rose Topiary Team. Pat Hammer is with Maria and Loreto Ramirez. They have been working together for 30 years!



Photo: Pat Hammer



Cats have always been important to Pat so it was only natural that she would use cats in her logo. In one of her earliest displays for the American Ivy Society at the Philadelphia Flower Show, Pat used cats as a nod to her logo. These lions and cats were Pat's whimsical interpretation of the gardens at Alhambra. She posed 4 statue-like lions around a the famous fountain and added 6 life-sized playful house kitties. Pat's philosophy is that gardening should always be fun.



These are just a few of the succulent moss-filled topiary at the current Samia Rose Topiary nursery in San Marcos.

San Diego: New Business Ventures

Pat relocated to San Diego in 1992 upon an agreement with Evelyn Weidner that Weidner's Gardens would grow the ivies Pat needed to create topiary for her new venture. Samia Rose Topiary was in business. Many San Diegans enjoyed Pat's retail creations showcased in her shop, but the serious money was in large sculptural figures. For 13 years, Pat created themed topiary for major clients and events throughout the country and even for a western theme park in Japan. In 2001, her larger-than-life topiary mariachi band with dancers was the showstopper for the prestigious Philadelphia Flower show. The relocated "band" with dancers now resides at San Diego Botanic Garden (formerly Quail Botanical Gardens) and is the most popular, most photographed display in the Garden. Locally, long-time residents may remember other figures and groups: scarecrows and ravens, fanciful surfing rhinos, even a pink Cadillac. Her creations have been the subject of articles in national magazines, including *Smithsonian*, *Plants Alive*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Sunset*, *Veranda*, *American Ivy Society Journal*, many local newspapers in Atlanta, Philadelphia, Dallas and Seattle and her presentations on topiary were in demand throughout the country. Pat appeared on *This Morning* and *The Christopher Lowell Show*.

Organizations: Local and National

Not long after arriving in San Diego, Pat became heavily involved in the newly formed San Diego Horticulture Society, serving on their board as they developed projects and plans. She advocated for becoming involved in the San Diego Spring Home/Garden Show at the Del Mar Fairgrounds. Garden displays at this event elevated the public's interest and involvement in plants and horticulture, jump, started the membership of San Diego Horticulture Society, and provided exposure for local nurseries, growers, designers and contractors. The show also invited participation by other plant groups and provided extensive public education.

A world expert in ivy because of her topiary experience, Pat served as president of the American Ivy Society from 1990-2000. Notable for San Diego, she organized a national conference at the San Diego Zoo, a first for the primarily East Coast Ivy Society membership.

Recently, Samia Rose Topiary was awarded the Judge's Choice ribbon for the succulent covered Basset Hound at the Palomar Cactus and Succulent Show.



Photo: Samia Rose Topiary

Botanical Garden Management . . . and a (Working) Retirement

In 2005—with her background in horticulture and a wealth of experience in public speaking and running a business—Pat was invited to become Director of Operations for San Diego Botanic Garden (then Quail Botanical Gardens). Under the leadership of Julian Duval, this was a period of great growth for the Garden. Pat was involved in every aspect of the Garden except fundraising. She was the quiet force keeping everything running smoothly: human resources, budget, public events, education, and volunteer management.

Upon retiring in 2017, our own “queen of topiary” revitalized Samia Rose Topiary and now conducts a home operation in San Marcos. Pat has developed a line of topiary kits which can be purchased via mail order on her website: srtopiary.com. Succulents have supplanted many ivies in her smaller home collection, which are still infused with joy and character. She also hosts private on-site classes and events and is open by appointment, with occasional days open to the public. Her love of plants and connecting plants to people is everlasting.



Photos: Rachel Cobb

Above: Philadelphia Flower Show
Below: San Diego Botanic Garden



In 2001 Samia Rose Topiary was chosen to create the center feature exhibit at the Philadelphia Flower Show. The exhibit was entitled the Tijuana Cantina and featured 8 human figures. After the Philadelphia exhibit returned to California it was displayed at other venues. In 2005 Samia Rose Topiary donated the 8 figures from the exhibit to the Quail Gardens (now San Diego Botanic Garden) to be part of the Mexican Garden.