



Interview

Konnie Kara

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Meet Konnie Kara, a wedding journalist by day and a bride-to-be by night. With insider access to all the latest bridal news, and planning advice, she's been called a wedding guru many times, but does she have what it takes to plan her own special day? Offering honest, frank and humorous insights and opinions, this is an account of one of the most exhilarating, and rollercoaster-emotion-filled years of her life.

Konnie Kara: OK, so aside from the mounting deadlines and sometimes overwhelming stress levels, there are a gazillion aspects of wedding planning I absolutely adore.

I am thrilled whenever I come across new and exciting companies. The main event this week was a visit to Topiary House in Chorleywood, Surrey, for coffee and biscuits with company owners, Duncan and Diana Ormrod. Topiary House are one of the UK's biggest supplier of topiary trees and have recently branched out into private purchase and hire for weddings and events. I decided it was a topic I had to look into - for myself as I'm personally looking into décor options for the marquee and reception venue and for other brides - because having topiary at your wedding has become a massive trend in recent years.

I've been a secret admirer for a long time especially because they look good in both historic and contemporary settings. One of my favourite gardens in the UK belongs to Stapleford Park, which is where Vinnie and I are booking for a little mini-moon after the registry. It's in Leicestershire, but it stands out for me because of the wonderfully kept gardens and use of topiary trees as landscaping architecture. They make the hotel look so elegant and inviting - something Duncan believes helped inspired him to set up the company in the first place.

'Topiary House was established almost through default at a time of driving around London and noticing how so many smart hotels and restaurants lacked entrance plants,' Duncan says.

'Those that did exuded a classic, elegant feel, a total contrast to those that did not. Having made my first purchase of topiary from a boot sale years ago, I immediately fell in love with these compelling, structured plants. I could tell even then that this would be a passionate relationship that would last a lifetime.'

I explained to Duncan how keen I am to give my wedding that same touch of elegance and opulence you see at upmarket hotels. I just feel that having real, living topiary plants scattered and placed everywhere around my wedding marquee and then even at the reception venue (including the top table) will transform the place and atmosphere into something truly sophisticated and ornate. I became addicted to websites featuring real life Stateside weddings where topiary are hired in abundance for outdoor ceremonies, and since I'm having an outdoor wedding I feel compelled to treat my guests to a little bit of ancient beauty (Duncan informed me that the Romans were obsessed with the art of topiary gardening).

What I especially love is how something as pretty as a topiary tree can also double up as something practical. With the growing trend of brides getting married in their back gardens, you don't always find you have the time to grow specific flowers and plants in time for the big day and so hiring topiary is a really good way to transform a space and decorate important areas - such as doorways and entrances.

So far Duncan has been one of my favourite wedding suppliers to work with mostly because he has a unique kindness, patience and honesty I've not come across before whilst planning my wedding. I'm also a bit of a sucker for his South African accent and calm nature as well as his meticulous attention to detail and taking the time to assure me he'll do whatever it takes to make sure my wedding day is a dream.

So while I ordered lots of topiary from him (rose bay bushes for the aisleway, buxus and spiral planters for the entrance

TOPIARY HOUSE

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to the marquee and also reception banquet room) I managed to fit in a brief interview here too. I've a feeling you'll like Duncan just as much as I do - and will have learned lots about topiary as a beautiful wedding décor idea by the time you've finished reading!

When did you set up Topiary House?

Duncan: I arrived in England 10 years ago from Cape Town with just one suitcase, having sold my accounting practice. I started off my career in banking, becoming one of the youngest Bank Managers in Cape Town at the age of 23 and then going onto to more senior roles before setting up the firm. My eldest son Drew met me at Heathrow as he had already been staying and working in London. Drew's first words to me were 'Dad you are very brave to start again from scratch.' I explained to him that all it would take to set up in the UK was a little courage and a small bag of madness. So Topiary House started as a family run business by myself and Diana in 2000.

What is topiary?

Duncan: Topiary is simply the unique art or practice of trimming and shaping plants into ornamental shapes. These can be classic and elegant designs or contemporary, funky and quirky.

Was setting up the business a longstanding passion?

Duncan: When I arrived in England I decided to get out of the rat race and try and avoid stress at all levels, so I set up a garden and landscape business. I have an absolute passion for plants and my interest in topiary stemmed from there. I'd had enough of offices and just longed to do something more creative.

How are you finding working with brides?

Duncan: We've done a lot of high profile weddings this year - which is a blessing as I really enjoy working alongside brides. Weddings are so emotional and personal that brides often only want to book with companies who have come to them highly recommended. This is such an important aspect of my business - being reliable and trustworthy is essential when working with couples on the biggest day of their lives. I pay extra special attention to all their needs.

Can you tell me about your favourite topiary for weddings?

Duncan: All topiary is beautiful for weddings! I only supply hand cut topiary; not machine cut, so it's a labour of love - you could say the same thing about planning a wedding too! Because of the UK's natural history and heritage it has some of the world's best locations for weddings - whether it be churches, marquees or banqueting facilities. We recently created a topiary display inside a massive tee pee marquee.

A lot of brides love standard bay tree topiary, simply because they exuberate a sense of well-being and peace. However, other common topiary plants for weddings include the Boxwood (Buxus), Taxus Baccata (Yew), bays, spirals, balls and cloud trees. I'm able to obtain any size, shape or form of topiary plant and have it delivered to our premises in Chorleywood within three days.

Why is it seen as a luxury to have topiary at weddings?

Duncan: The plants are expensive because they take years to grow and are continuously shaped during growth - usually once a year. The time it takes to grow depends on the height and shape - for example a Buxus Ball can take upto 10-20 years depending on how big you want the topiary. Plus, weddings are all about creating the right impression, so framing a doorway or entrance at a church or any other venue really helps set the scene for romance, tradition or modernism. It's a prestigious type of wedding decoration but - having said that - can work out as a beautiful and sometimes cost effective alternative to fresh flowers when hiring. Rose topiary bushes are really effective table centre pieces too. I think generally the trees help transform a bride's wedding atmosphere into something magical.

How can topiary be used as an ice-breaker for guests?

Duncan: Topiary generally is a great talking point because you can hire so many designs, decorate the trees how you want - such as with silk roses, fresh flowers, fresh herbs such as lavender and rosemary, LED fairy lights interwoven in the branches - or if you want something really show-stopping, get a unique design commissioned. We've supplied

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topiary in the shape of VW Beetles, Ferraris, swans and candle pillar shapes.

Who helps you run the business?

Duncan: Everything from the formation of the Company, the trips to Europe to establish suppliers, attending trade fairs, purchases, sales, accounting and maintenance of the Topiary Plants in our small Nursery is done by me. However I could not have set up without my wife Diana who has given me tremendous moral support in every way possible. I have a very high regard and respect for her as a woman, wife and friend.

How has your business grown in the last year?

Duncan: It has grown from strength to strength. I want to grow at a good and steady pace and focus on building relationships as trust is so vitally important. If you look on our website the testimonials we've received are just amazing. Brides email to say how stunning their wedding days looked because of the topiary, and that feedback makes it all worthwhile. I'll be doing a few exhibitions in the next year, and really concentrating on the wedding market in the UK.

Topiary House are exclusively offering all iVillage readers a 10 per cent discount for topiary hire booked with them. Please quote iVillage when you fill out their online enquiry form at topiaryhouse.co.uk or call Duncan on 01923 350482 or 01923 284095.

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