

The Evergreen of Choice

To renovate or replace your *not so dwarf* English boxwood

From the 18th century to the present, the well known English boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens* ‘Suffruticosa’) has been the evergreen of choice for many gardeners, homeowners and landscape designers. Its glossy green foliage adorns such national sites as the White House, Colonial Williamsburg and Mount Vernon, and its elegant yet unassuming presence is woven into the history of our own homes, gardens and heritage.

With its low-maintenance attributes, compact nature and no-nonsense appeal, it’s no wonder that English boxwood continue to flourish for decades or even centuries in the older neighborhoods and gardens of Virginia. Often, these shrubs reach sizes that one no longer considers “dwarf.”

When sited and maintained properly, the English boxwood is unsurpassed in form and function. But given their longevity, it is not surprising that many older specimens have outgrown their spaces or suffered from years of weather damage, pest problems or improper care. It is not uncommon to see English boxwood swallowing a sidewalk or overwhelming a border while others simply become hopelessly damaged and degraded.

This leads us to the following question: Can overgrown or misshapen English boxwood be renovated, or should they be replaced?

RENOVATION VERSUS REPLACEMENT

Renovation is a process which takes

commitment, patience and a bit of horticultural knowledge to pull off successfully. Many renovations which involve significant corrective pruning are necessary because the plant simply grew too large. Whether they obstruct views, hinder the use of pathways, or encroach on other structures, once a plant outgrows its intended function, its value and usefulness in the landscape is questionable. Drastic pruning can be very successful if your boxwood is sited well, has a decent branching structure and can have its future maintenance needs met.

SUCCESSFUL RENOVATION

- Realize that this project will take several years. In the meantime, your boxwood may appear unsightly until new foliage flushes out.
- Use the right tools. Use a sharp curved pruning saw for larger branches and sharp bypass hand pruners for smaller ones.
- In early spring, prune ONE HALF of the branches randomly throughout the shrub, down to the intended size.
- Two years later, prune the other half of the branches in the same manner.
- DO NOT treat pruning cuts with paints or wound coatings as these will interfere with proper sealing of the cuts.
- Two to three years after this major pruning, there will be many new, dense branches near the pruning cuts. Promote a desirable structure by selectively thinning these congested branches.

Replacement is often the more difficult decision to make, but an easier task to carry out. Boxwood with large gaping holes caused by dead or dying branches, generally can’t be restored to the intended size or shape and are good candidates for replacement. Replacement is also a good option for owners who prefer the instant gratification of shiny new nursery stock rather than the commitment and uncertainty of renovation. In the case of seriously overgrown boxwood, the confines of your space may require a smaller, more compact plant to achieve design goals. A different boxwood species or cultivar may be a more appropriately sized plant for your space.



△ A replacement planting of English boxwood maintains the intent of the garden design and the function of the hedges that border the path.

These boxwood have been neglected and the path is no longer useful. They are good candidates for renovation, a process which takes two years or more.▷

Proper Care of English Boxwood

Exposure: Site plants in partial sun with protection from winter wind, which is generally from the northwest. North or east exposure is the best choice.

pH: Ensure that soil nutrients are available to your plants by maintaining a soil pH between 6.5 and 7.2. See www.soiltest.vt.edu/soiltest or visit your local cooperative extension office for proper soil sampling instructions and kits.

Thinning: Between October and December, prune out branches between 6-8 inches in length around the entire plant. Doing so will allow much needed air and light to infiltrate the inner portion of the plant, reducing the number and severity of insects and diseases. Remove about 10 percent of the outer branches. In the end, you will see small voids around the entire plant, but the overall shape of the shrub will remain unchanged. Small stems that have been "thinned out" can be used in holiday wreaths and arrangements. Do not shear your plants or you will destroy their natural form.

Pests: Monitor pests regularly so that control efforts can be implemented before major damage occurs. See the VA Cooperative Extension website (pubs.ext.vt.edu/category/garden-insects-pests.html) for information about pest management strategies.

Nutrition: Fertilize boxwood only when a diagnosed deficiency is present. Soil sample analysis will provide you with specific fertilizer recommendations. If fertilizing is warranted, only do so in the fall.

Water: Boxwood need 1 inch of water every week to 10 days during the growing season, usually April through October in Virginia. Water infrequently but thoroughly, as opposed to watering lightly and often. Do not water when it rains more than 1 inch per week. Boxwood do not like "wet feet."

Mulch: Apply mulch 1 inch deep to control weeds, reduce moisture loss and control temperature fluctuations. Use shredded hardwood, pine needles or conifer bark.

For comprehensive boxwood information, consult *Boxwood Handbook: A Practical Guide to Knowing and Growing Boxwood* by Lynn R. Batdorf or visit the American Boxwood Society at www.boxwoodsociety.org.



This English boxwood hedge is over 8 feet tall and 150 years old.

Sharp pruners are used to cut half of the branches down to the appropriate size.



KEEP THIS IN MIND WHEN MAKING REPLACEMENTS:

- What caused the original problem? If there are existing pest or disease problems, they may persist and infect or infest your new shrubs. Likewise, if your soil is poor or improper pH, new plants will respond similarly to the ones you are removing. Soil pH for boxwood should fall between 6.5 and 7.2.
- Is English boxwood an appropriate choice for your site? Just because you may be removing one species of plant does not mean you must replace it with the same. Keep in mind that there are over 100 cultivars of boxwood with varying requirements and attributes.
- Buy high quality boxwood from reputable sources. Often, you get what you pay for.
- Planting and transplanting should be done in the early fall which will allow plenty of time for plants to establish roots. Plant so that about 10 percent of the root ball is above soil level.
- Be realistic about maintenance. New plants need watering during both summer

and winter droughts. They also need proper thinning and pest monitoring.

- If you're contemplating removing old boxwood, and you don't want to destroy great grandma's gardening legacy, remember that replacement will often do more to honor the integrity of the original design than leaving overgrown or unhealthy plants.
- If you really want to make yourself feel better, take vegetative cuttings from your "old friends," root and grow them out for several years, then use these new plants as your replacements or in other areas of your garden. ♻️

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Ten Boxwood That Top the List of Great Performers in Virginia:

Grace Hendrick Phillips boxwood (*Buxus microphylla* 'Grace Hendrick Phillips')

Green Beauty boxwood (*Buxus microphylla* var. *japonica* 'Green Beauty')

Morris Midget boxwood (*Buxus microphylla* var. *japonica* 'Morris Midget')

Common boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*)

Columnar boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens* 'Dee Runk')

Variegated silver boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens* 'Elegantissima')

English boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens* 'Suffruticosa')

Yugoslavian boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens* 'Vardar Valley')

Korean boxwood (*Buxus sinica* var. *insularis*)

Justin Brouwers boxwood (*Buxus sinica* var. *insularis* 'Justin Brouwers')

Source: Appleton, Bonnie and Lois Trigg Chaplin. *The New York/Mid-Atlantic Gardener's Book of Lists*. Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2001.

Visit the American Boxwood Society at www.boxwoodsociety.org for more information.