

Our Beloved Boxwoods

There are at least 30 different species of boxwood but only two are readily available everywhere. Historically these useful shrubs go back to early Greece and Rome which tells you they thrive in a maritime climate. Of course they do particularly well near the Chesapeake Bay. From dwarf cultivars to those that grow tree tall there are plenty to choose from. One Buxus cultivar 'Green Velvet' won a prestigious gold medal from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, not an award given lightly.

'Green Velvet' is a happy accident: way back in the 1970s in an Ontario, Canada nursery two different plant species were planted so close that they were cross-pollinated. The parents were Buxus microphylla, a Korean species, and B. sempervirens, the English box. This fortunate offspring has lustrous deep green foliage, grows in zones 4 to 7, tops out at three feet high and four wide and is drought tolerant. It is said that deer dislike 'Green Velvet' perhaps because those ruminants have feasted on your hostas?

Because they are such sturdy survivors, we tend to take their care for granted but boxwoods will respond handsomely to attention. For one thing, their shallow roots need to be well mulched so they do not dry out nor suffer frost damage. Nor do those shallow roots appreciate competition from aggressive ground covers. Another reason to mulch them well is to prevent damage to the roots by too aggressive weeding around them.

Unlike a lot of shrubs we take for granted, boxwoods are heavy feeders. A slow release fertilizer can be used in spring followed by monthly snacks of a dilute liquid fertilizer with a little seaweed extract if you have it. Any plant will enjoy living the high life but most can be adequately sustained with use of your homemade compost.

There is always a lively discussion about pruning boxwood. Trim their sides if you don't want them growing into each other but otherwise they can be left alone. Obviously boxwoods are not harmed by pruning: witness the excesses of topiary to which they have been subjected over the centuries.

If parts of your plant are winter killed, you can cut them back in late winter but don't remove more than 1/3 of the height or breadth of the plant in any one year. Any incursion of salt water will eventually kill them, so take care where you plant them. Dormant oil sprayed in early spring guards against damage from aphids or overwintering mites. Sometimes a plant will suffer from bronzed leaves and stunted growth traced to the presence of various nematodes. The effects of the infestation are noticeable when the plant fails to recover from the heat.

Too small to see, nematodes appear under a microscope as whitish, translucent, wormlike creatures. One thing you might try is adding heaps of compost to the surrounding soil to encourage beneficial fungi. Liquid fish emulsion, applied as a drench, will both repel nematodes and boost root development.

HAVE YOU NOTICED the beauty everywhere? Along with volunteer goldenrod my neglected garden still has white Gaura and tall white Patrinia scabiosifolia. There is a yellow Patrinia, a sharp acid yellow that I thought would be good with browning fall foliage but what bloomed was white. My garden has a lot of gang-aft-agley. However, the white one has worked its way around the fading rudbeckia and is a contrast to the black-eyed Susan's remaining black eyes.

One curious note is the Rhododendron PJM in full bloom. Technically it is an 'early' bloomer but the end of September? 'Early' is late February, isn't it?

A later than usual bloomer is the amber/pink Chrysanthemum 'Mary Stoker' coming into flower under the pink muhly grass. Lovely- takes my mind off the weeds. Another plus is the unusual display of fruit on the Cleyera japonica. This handsome evergreen has to be whacked back occasionally if it outgrows its allotted space but after that treatment last winter it bloomed a lot in spring.

The flowers are small creamy white bowls but the fall fruits are spectacular! Clusters of half-inch tan and rose balls burst open in thirds revealing a velvety white interior holding six bright red seeds. An unexpected blessing.