

A Look Beyond Boxwood

Yes, boxwood, *Buxus sempervirens*, is the quintessential Virginia foundation and formal garden plant. Aside from a few minor ailments that this favorite seems able to live with without major corrective measures, boxwood is a comfortable, slow growing, live-forever, shallow rooted, easily moved, pleasantly green year-round shrub. Did I mention that it doesn't require pruning and is happy in shade and morning sun?

If we are plagued with a truly dry summer, boxwood requires watering, not sprinkling which is a waste of water, but a weekly soaking of the roots. In our area English box may suffer from the boxwood leafminer. The tiny larva feed between leaf layers. During their flying stage they can be trapped by pheromone lures that cuts the population by reducing the sexes by one. Deep mulch over newspapers around the plant deters over-wintering and egg-laying.

If you are looking forward to the fall planting season to add charm to your landscape, shrink the area needing mowing, and slash the upkeep hours, today is prime planning time. It may be too hot to putter about outside forming mental plans to determine what plant will be moved where, stay inside and map it out on paper. Several nurseries have their catalogs online so there is a wealth of information available

You may not have space for the traditional *Magnolia grandiflora* but there are other options. One is *Magnolia virginiana*, a relatively small, nearly evergreen tree with creamy white flowers that bloom during summer. The red-seeded cones are one to two inches long and a treat for birds. The undersides of the leaves are nearly white giving the tree an airy look in a breeze. Another choice is *M. grandiflora* 'Little Gem', a dwarf variety with a long bloom season. Compared to the huge native tree, it is dwarf, but it is a tree and perfect to provide shade for a picnic table, patio, or sandbox.

Smaller still is *Syringa patula* 'Miss Kim'. This five to six foot lilac actually tolerates our hot summers. The leaves are smaller and less heart-shaped than *S. vulgaris* but the flowers are the beloved purple and fragrant. Another shrub that is a good neighbor and not as familiar as one might expect is the dwarf, three foot *Fothergilla gardenii*. It has small white very fragrant flowers and the leathery blue-green leaves turn brilliant red, orange, and yellow in fall. *F. major* is a little larger, becomes bushy and has white bottle-brush flowers in late spring as the leaves first unfold. Leave space around it as it sends up new shoots if happily sited.

Two laurels are not used as often as they could be. One, English Laurel or Common Cherry Laurel is not a laurel at all but *Prunus laurocerasus*. It is handsome with elegant shiny dark green leaves and white flowers. It does fruit but the blue-black berries are hidden under the foliage. It comes large and small: *P. Schiipkaensis* grows to ten feet and P.I. 'Otto Luyken' reaches to four. It is trouble free and I trust the one I have that got in the way of an overenthusiastic lopper will recover. Too close to a burgeoning *Michelia figo* (Banana shrub) is Alexandrian Laurel, *Danae racemosa*, called Poet's Laurel. This plant is neither laurel nor shrub but a wonderful evergreen long-lived perennial. It is rhizomatous so you can divide it with a sharp spade. The branched shoots bear leaf-like stems, lovely for bouquets or circling a hero's brow. The little noticed flowers result in marvelous fat red berries.

One beautiful specimen that sadly failed in a poor soil spot in my garden is *Fatsia japonica* (aka *Aralia japonica*). It grows to about six feet, likes full sun or dappled shade, and has large leathery palmate 7-to-11 lobed leaves. A lovely tropical! Unusual in that it blooms in autumn with compound umbels of small creamy white flowers that expand to a foot across: the

flowers are followed by spherical black fruits. It is tolerant of coastal conditions and air pollution and is also suitable for large containers. It prefers fertile, moist, well-drained soil and shelter from cold winds as it is hardy in zones 8 to 10.

Poor soil will not kill *Lonicera nitida* 'Baggesens's Gold'. Indeed, *Lonicera* does mean honeysuckle but any resemblance between this plant and other honeysuckles is too subtle to be seen by most of us. It soldiers on in an inhospitable spot growing slowly with mounding long stems covered in small golden green leaves. It is said to grow five feet tall but mine remains a ground hugger. It may have insignificant fruits and flowers but it has a fresh and bright color. Bless its heart – it is durable!

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