

Hard Lessons about Boxwood Blight

by Bobbi Lewicki*



Bobbi's boxwood before the blight



For over 30 years I have added boxwood of all types to my yard. Donated from family, friends, bought from backyard growers and nurseries, they formed a wonderful evergreen background and were deer and vole proof (these animals are major destructors in my yard). Then in 2015, I came home from a vacation and found two of my boxwood turning gray and dropping leaves. I took a sample immediately up to my Extension office and the next day I got a call that identified my boxwood as having boxwood blight. It just happened that there were two Virginia Tech (VT) people in the neighborhood who would like to come see my property if I was willing.

The next day Mike Likins from Chesterfield Co. and Dr. Chuan Hong from Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center in Virginia Beach came by and confirmed the diagnosis as well as giving me the options available. They identified the source as a group of small 1-gallon English boxwood that had been bought in May from a big box store. I still had them in their pots in my holding area. Since there is no cure yet, I was advised to tear out all the boxwood and burn them, bury them, or seal them up then send to a landfill. I had over 400 boxwood, some of which, my father had started for me from my grandmothers plants. I was pretty overwhelmed. But I was offered another option to try.



The blight spread throughout the collection



So starting in September of 2015, my boxwood and I started participating as a VT Research project. My part was to spray all of the boxwood every 2 to 3 weeks with Daconil, depending on the weather and stopping when cold weather set in. Clean up was essential, so the leaves and dying branches were bagged or burned. I lived with a 70% isopropyl alcohol spray bottle next to me every time I moved around the yard, along with bleach solution I kept in a wading pool for sterilizing tools and tarps. Clothes, shoes, and all tools were sanitized at the end of each workday or as I moved to new areas. By winter, most of my boxwood on the front and one side of my yard were showing damage. Even my sweet box and pachysandra ground covers began showing blight.

When early Spring began, new experiments were started. When the time to spray Daconil began again, boxwood plants were cut back and mulched up to a 7" layer. A weather station was put in that measured wind, rain, and soil temperatures as well as leaf moisture on remaining plants. Then we moved to animal observation. I live in the country and am home to an assortment of animals. They used a "go pro" to record the animals and even I was surprised by the amount of animals that moved through the boxwood plants. Even wolf spiders which lived in the boxwood were studied. Next, we cut the boxwood at various heights and at different times during the year. Basically, it showed that no matter what growth regenerated, heavy rain patterns pushed rampant boxwood blight growth. Slowly I was losing my boxwood section by section throughout the yard even with regular sprays of Daconil.

I cut down the boxwood only as a last resort because of their value to me. But what I have found is that if I had cut down the boxwood as soon as it showed any sign of blight, I might have been able to save some of them. It also would have reduced the amount of work that took up over 3 years of spraying, pruning, sanitizing, and putting down mulch. It has been a very painful process of losing almost my entire boxwood planting and all the troubles began with a dozen of healthy-looking but actually infected boxwood plants from the big box store.

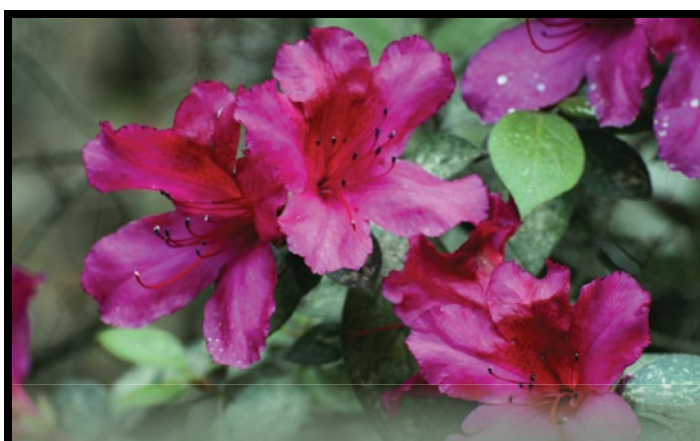
We have reached Year 4 and a new experiment is starting. Old stumps have been taken out and burned along with all those little leaves hiding in the perennials and ground covers. I've pulled back the ground covers from certain areas. The gardens look more defined and will be easier to take care of. In all, I'm

looking forward to a new year and a new garden. It's been so interesting to be a part of this experiment and to see the science that goes in to controlling a disease and improving a plant's health. I miss my boxwood planting but I'm looking forward to rebuilding a garden with NewGen boxwood, mulching and other latest boxwood blight mitigation innovations.

** Bobbi Lewicki is a boxwood enthusiast living in Virginia. We plan to follow her story, and the research project conducted by Virginia Tech, in the coming years.*



The origin of the infestation, a few boxwood from a big box store



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