

Boxwood Blight – It's Here (published 2025-05-25)

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Boxwood shrubs are so attractive with their small, shiny evergreen leaves. Unfortunately, many varieties are quite susceptible to a fungal infection called boxwood blight. Other problems that can plague these shrubs are leafminers, psyllids (plant lice, tiny, sap-sucking insects with very specific feeding preferences), and boxwood mites. Common diseases include fungal infections - boxwood blight, Volutella blight and Macrophoma leaf spot. Root rot and damage from harsh winter winds can also occur. The good news is most of these problems can be avoided or successfully treated. The bad news is boxwood blight is extremely contagious and very difficult to treat. Further, treatments may prevent further infection but cannot cure diseased shrubs.

I've seen boxwoods infected with blight in my neighborhood and in Blountville. It is definitely here. If you see areas of discolored or dead leaves, the first thing to do is have the plant examined to see what is causing the damage. You can contact your county extension agent who can look at the shrub. He/she may be able to identify common pests. If testing is needed the county agent can provide the necessary form to submit to the University of Tennessee lab for pathology testing for a fee. Testing can help determine the cause of the damage if unclear from physical examination so that the proper treatment is used. The report will also provide recommended treatments for pests or diseases listed.

To submit a sample, take cuttings when leaves are dry. Be sure to wear disposable or washable gloves when handling the affected branches and sanitize the pruners with 10% bleach solution followed by a good rinse and oil or use 70% alcohol. Dip the tool in the solution for 10 to 30 seconds after each cutting. Give the gloves a good scrub as well.

It is important to remove infected branches and rake up leaves on the ground. If a large part of the plant is infected, remove the entire shrub. DO NOT MULCH the diseased material. You need to either burn it if allowed in your area or bag it and dispose of it in the trash.

Boxwood blight cannot be cured in an infected shrub, but the proper fungicide can prevent further infection. The fungicide must be applied every 7 to 14 days throughout the growing season. Boxwood blight will eventually kill the shrub.

Preventing Boxwood Blight - An ounce or more of prevention.....

The most obvious way to prevent boxwood blight is to use a different shrub. Inkberry holly (Ilex glabra) cultivars are great alternatives to boxwoods. There are several cultivars that are small and dense with shiny evergreen leaves that closely resemble boxwoods, such as 'Compacta' "Gem Box" and 'Shamrock'.

If you just must have boxwoods, buy from a trusted nursery that complies with a blight compliance agreement. There are also blight resistant cultivars. Do your homework before buying. Once purchased, keep the new shrubs away from others for several weeks to ensure blight is not present.

Plant the new shrubs in an area that has not had boxwoods in the past. The fungus can remain viable in the soil for several years. Space the shrubs far enough apart so branches do not touch for good air circulation. Water plants with soaker hoses or drip irrigation rather than overhead with sprinklers or hoses.

Avoid buying holiday wreaths that contain boxwood. If you have some, make sure any branches from them do not contact your shrubs. And again, never compost any boxwood materials.

If boxwood blight has been found in your area but your plants do not show signs of infection, consider a preventative fungicide treatment. The treatment must be used every 7 to 14 days throughout the growing season. If your shrubs are infected but not displaying signs of disease, a fungicide will not help and the disease will eventually become apparent.

Monitor your shrubs weekly for any signs of disease and remove leaves and branches promptly as noted previously.

Resources at the end of this article provide important details about boxwoods and blight.

Resources

“Boxwood Blight,” <https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/boxwood-blight/>

“Prevention and Management of Boxwood Blight,” <https://plantpathology.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Box-blight-Guide-07.22.13.pdf?fwd=no>

“Boxwood Blight,” <https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/BP/BP-203-W.pdf>

“Expanding on the Boxwood Blight Management Decision Guide,” https://ext.vt.edu/content/dam/ext_vt_edu/boxwoodblighttaskforce/files/expanding_BB_decision_guide_v1.pdf

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IkIH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site: <https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These

volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.