

## Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

### **BOXWOOD (BUXUS)**

**By Ann Stevens Kelly, Garden Volunteer (in Spring 2014 issue of The Post Serial, the volunteer newsletter)**

The evergreen shrub commonly known as boxwood (*Buxus*) in America and as “box” in other English-speaking countries is a key landscape element in Hillwood’s French Parterre garden.

These time-tested shrubs with their attractive green or variegated leaves are deer resistant, a big plus for any garden. Boxwood is considered a top shrub choice for gardens by many landscape professionals, who can choose from 148 different cultivars and species now available commercially. Boxwood are perfect for hedges, edging gardens and terraces, and for bonsai.

Boxwood are also the perfect choice for sculpting and shearing into topiaries and smaller shapes, which is why they were chosen for the French Parterre garden design. Boxwood were introduced into America in the mid-1600s when they became an essential part of colonial gardens where they grew well in sun and part-shade.

The slow-growing English boxwood, *B. sempervirens* ‘*Suffruticosa*’, that came to colonial America were originally in Mrs. Post’s French Parterre garden. They were replanted in that garden (replacing a Korean boxwood cultivar) as part of the extensive restoration work at Hillwood in 2000. Maintaining those English boxwood as they aged was not easy because they became susceptible to diseases, possibly due to climate change, especially to what is known as boxwood decline—a slow decline attributed to the fungus *Paecilomyces* and other pathogens.

After 13 years in the ground, Hillwood decided it was time to replace them with a different cultivar. “We tried to find something that looked like English boxwood, would shear well, and would like the growing conditions in the Parterre,” said Jessica Bonilla, head gardener at Hillwood. “We did a lot of research, looking at different cultivars. Disease resistance was the main consideration in the current selection.”

That research included working with Robert Saunders of Saunders Brothers, a nursery near Richmond which specializes in boxwood, because he had started national boxwood trials which are being conducted locally, including at the White House and Mt. Vernon.

Bonilla says they talked with Dean Norton, director of horticulture at Mt. Vernon, who redid the knot garden there 13 years ago with the boxwood *B. microphylla* var. *japonica* ‘*Morris Dwarf*’. Norton said they hadn’t lost one of them, so that cultivar seemed a promising choice since Mt. Vernon has experienced boxwood problems similar to those in the parterre. The horticulture staff also considered another cultivar, the Korean boxwood, *B. sinica* var. *insularis* ‘*Justin Brouwers*’, growing on the outside of the Mt. Vernon knot garden, but decided against it because it grew faster than the ‘*Morris Dwarf*’ and maybe was susceptible to some of the same diseases as the English boxwood.

About 440 three-gallon containers of the chosen 'Morris Dwarf' boxwood were planted last October (2013) in the French Parterre garden. Bonilla says they dug out soil to a depth of 15 inches in each boxwood bed, double checked the drainage, and fixed some of it. They amended some of the removed soil, adding Leaf Gro and top soil, 50/50, and layered the soil back into the beds. They also mixed in Stalite, a porous slate material which allows for drainage, yet holds some water for the plants to draw upon. The final layer they mixed in fertilizer, lime, and pine bark mulch and planted the 'Morris Dwarf' boxwood. The red decorative stones were put back on top but not the metal edging on the sides of the boxwood so their roots could go sideways instead of being forced down.

These shrubs were planted in the French Parterre in the design of a 16th century English ironworks scroll pattern. Bonilla says they made a template of the design, out of tarp along the metal edging that surrounded the boxwood, to position the new boxwood in the four beds, flipping it around as needed at each end of the garden. A small band of variegated boxwood are part of the design in each bed, and 32 one gallon containers of the new cultivar 'Golden Dream' were also planted in the garden. "We picked a more subtle, variegated boxwood with a creamier look," said Bonilla. "We also wanted a very disease resistant one." This cultivar is a Japanese boxwood also. The complete restoration of the boxwood beds in the French Parterre took a week to do but stretched into three due to heavy rains.

There are several other boxwood at Hillwood as well. The Japanese-style garden has the interesting Japanese cultivar 'Kingsville Dwarf'. The motor court is home to the variegated cultivar 'AureoVariegata' planted around the 19th century Greek goddess Eros sculpture. Planted at the entrance to the horticulture building is, the cultivar *B. microphylla* var. *koreana* 'Winter Gem'.

English boxwood are along the Friendship Walk, and American boxwood edge each side of the Rose Garden. The boxwood in the Rose Garden once edged the walkway across the lawn from the 18th century stone lion, Leo, to the vista terrace.

Fortunately boxwood are quite drought tolerant, a good feature in Washington's hot summers, and prefer well-drained soil. Fall is the best time for planting, and late winter is the best for pruning. They have fragrant little white flowers in the spring, and their attractive foliage is often used for Christmas decorations. Types of boxwood available in the commercial markets include Common, Japanese, Korean, and their hybrids. Some of the widely used cultivars in addition to those at Hillwood include 'Green Beauty', 'Vardar Valley', 'Green Velvet', 'Green Gem', and 'Wintergreen'.

The American Boxwood Society is a good source for more information on these widely used evergreen shrubs which have added structural design and beauty to many English and American gardens for centuries. Incidentally, you may be interested to know that the dense wood of larger boxwood was historically used for making parts for musical instruments, including woodwinds and bagpipes.