



# Boxwood stand-ins

Nurseries follow demand in developing evergreen alternatives to popular plant

One of Bailey's developments was a variety of *Distylium*, with its evergreen foliage that is disease resistant. First Editions® *Distylium* includes the Vintage Jade *Distylium* 'Vintage Jade' PP23128), which forms a mid-size mounding hedge. PHOTO COURTESY FIRST EDITIONS®

BY EMILY HOARD

**W**hile there's still demand for the rounded, hardy boxwood (*Buxus*), growers and retailers are responding to a shifting trend toward evergreen alternatives that don't face the same pest and disease issues as boxwood.

Megan McConnell, plant information director at **Monrovia Nursery** (a national wholesale grower based in California with other farms in Oregon, Georgia and Connecticut), said there's still a market for boxwoods but the East Coast is experiencing more problems with pests and disease.

"It's still popular in Oregon and California where they want that classic landscaping but on the southeast coast we're getting requests for alternatives," McConnell said.

## Shifting consumer demand

Ryan McEnaney, marketing and communications manager at **Bailey Nurseries** (a wholesale grower based in St. Paul, Minnesota with locations in Oregon, Washington, Illinois and Georgia), said consumers are looking for other options of species that have less pressure from disease.

"That's why we as a company have looked at our breeding plan to offer evergreen options that have that refined look but are hardy and disease resistant," McEnaney said.

Peter Eastman, tree and shrub buyer at **Al's Garden & Home** (a retailer based in Woodburn, Oregon with four locations in all), said boxwoods continue to be the company's number one selling broadleaf evergreen plant, but there are some good alternatives



Mr. Bowling Ball® Arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'Bobozam') keeps a round shape with no shearing. PHOTO COURTESY MONROVIA

## Boxwood stand-ins



Strongbox® (*Ilex glabra* 'ILEXFARROWTRACEY' PP30147) includes "box" in the name to associate them with the plants they're trying to imitate. They have soft leaves and can be sheared into different shapes. PHOTO COURTESY PROVEN WINNERS

to offer. He said they're still popular in the landscaping industry in Oregon as opposed to other parts of the U.S. where landscapers have given up on boxwood entirely.

"Growers are starting to come up with alternatives that look close to boxwood," Eastman said.

### No perfect replacement

Noah Fessler, inside sales representative at **Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas** (a wholesale grower based in Woodburn, Oregon), said one of the big challenges when talking about replacements for boxwood is that there isn't a perfect replacement for it.

"Some people use holly (*Ilex*) and some customers use globe arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis*) like Tater Tot™ or Fire Chief™," Fessler said. "But there's not really a one-for-one substitute. There are some tradeoffs."

In general, Woodburn Nurseries' customers tend to prefer the boxwood look and there are not a ton of evergreen low-growing options. Fessler also said there

are not many options in colder zones that look as stately and formal as boxwood.

### Alternatives

Stacey Hirvela, marketing manager at **Spring Meadow Nursery** (a wholesale grower based in Grand Haven, Michigan) and Proven Winners, said her nursery has been seeing the trend toward boxwood alternatives for years.

In 2017, Spring Meadow Nursery started working on different species and varieties that resemble boxwoods to specifically position as boxwood alternatives.

"Now boxwood tree moth is more of an issue so there's even more of a spotlight on it," Hirvela said.

"There are few that are quite as deer resistant and shade resistant as boxwood," Hirvela said.

McEnaney said one of Bailey's developments was a variety of *Distylium*, with its evergreen foliage that is disease resistant.

"It's an evergreen species with the same or similar leaf color and shape as you would experience with boxwood, so if you're looking for that one-to-one replace-

ment, it is a species that does really well," McEnaney said. "When we introduced it we called it the best plant you've never heard of because it was underutilized, so it's great to be able to celebrate it as a boxwood alternative."

Bailey Nurseries First Editions® *Distylium* includes the Linebacker™ *Distylium* (*Distylium* 'PIIDIST-IV' PP25984), known to be upright and hedge-forming; Swing Low® *Distylium* (*Distylium* 'PIIDIST-VI' PP29779) is a low-growing evergreen and Vintage Jade *Distylium* (*Distylium* 'Vintage Jade' PP23128) forms a mid-size mounding hedge.

McConnell at Monrovia said the classic boxwood alternative she's been seeing in the industry is Japanese holly (*Ilex crenata*).

"Japanese holly looks so similar to boxwood that people have trouble telling them apart," McConnell said. "They stay greener in the winter and perform better in the southeastern U.S."

The *Ilex crenata* are not as cold hardy as boxwoods but they perform well in zones 6–7. Monrovia introduced some new more compact varieties, >>

including the Luxus® Compact Japanese Holly (*Ilex crenata* ‘Annys5’ PPAF).

“The Luxus only reaches two feet wide and tall so it’s a great replacement for the dwarf English boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens* ‘Suffruticosa’) and a great option for a small hedge,” McConnell said. “You can shear them into shapes or leave them more natural.”

Monrovia also has some other exclusives it has been developing. LittleOne® Blue Holly (*Ilex × meserveae* ‘MonWilde’ PPAF) is a female plant, so planting it near a male will result in red berries in the fall. It gets to two to three feet and is hardy in zone 5.

Nordic™ Inkberry (*Ilex glabra* ‘Chamzin’) is very hardy to zone 3 and is popular on the East Coast, McConnell said.

Another Monrovia exclusive is the Orangena™ Vaccinium (*Vaccinium brevipedicullatum* ‘HINO’V’) with small



Sweet Box (*Sarcococca*) grows well in shade and is very popular because it looks similar to boxwood, is easy to shear and doesn’t suffer from the same problems as boxwood. PHOTO COURTESY PROVEN WINNERS

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A couple of popular options from Bailey Nurseries First Editions® is Chubby Hubby™ Japanese Holly (*Ilex crenata* 'MAD-IC-I' PP32035) (right) which grows into a wide, oval shape for a five to seven foot tall hedge and Straight & Narrow® Japanese Holly (*Ilex crenata* 'PIIC-I' PP29578), which becomes an upright, skinny focal point or hedge. PHOTO COURTESY FIRST EDITIONS®

evergreen leaves that hold an orange red hue and can take to rocky soils.

Eastman said dwarf *Escallonia* is a popular selling broadleaf evergreen at Al's. Compact *Escallonia* (*Escallonia hybrid* 'Compakta') has compact shiny green foliage and slowly grows to about two to three feet tall and wide. It blooms with bright red flowers in the summer. "Bees love it."

Al's Garden & Home also sells Monrovia's Golf Ball Pittosporum (*Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Golf Ball' PP15329) as a boxwood alternative. "It has shiny evergreen foliage, takes a lot of sun and is a perfect round ball," Eastman said. "The only drawback is that it's only zone 8 so in a really cold winter you might get dieback on it. I've gotten a lot of requests for it."

*Sarcococca humilis* is also an alternative that spreads with underground runners so most of Eastman's customers grow it in containers or planting boxes. It blossoms in February and March with small, extremely fragrant flowers, is hardy and grows well.

Hebe is an evergreen shrub from New Zealand that Eastman said has tight foliage that looks like boxwood except that it has showy blooms.

"The foliage is light green to dark to variegated and burgundy red. Some are

hardy and do well in winters and others are not hardy at all," Eastman said. "It's probably best suited to the coasts of Oregon and Washington and it is very adaptive to salt spray and sandy soil."

The boxwood hebe (*Hebe buxifolia*) is more cold tolerant and grows in a tight ball.

Eastman also mentioned the Champion and Imposter Hebes, as well as a silvery, hardy one called Red Edge, and a popular one with lavender colored flowers called Blue Mist Hebe.

Proven Winners has been selecting Inkberry holly (*Ilex glabra*) for its boxwood habits.

"Inkberry holly is tall and rangy so we've been selecting for the dense look and more rounded so they look more like boxwood," Hirvela said.

Through those selections came Gem Box® (*Ilex glabra* 'SMNIGAB17' PP27554) and Strongbox® (*Ilex glabra* 'ILEXFARROWTRACEY' PP30147), both include the term "box" in the name to associate them with the plants they're trying to imitate. They have soft leaves and can be sheared into different shapes, Hirvela said.

Proven Winners has also introduced some experimental varieties such as Juke Box® (× *Pyracomeles sp.* 'NCXP1' PP31409). It's an intergeneric hybrid between *Pyracantha* and *Osteomeles*. "It's not as hardy, it's zone 7 and but it has similar



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## Boxwood stand-ins



Proven Winners has also introduced some experimental varieties such as Juke Box® (× *Pyracomeles* sp. 'NCXP1' PP31409). It's an intergeneric hybrid between *Pyracantha* and *Osteomeles*. PHOTO COURTESY PROVEN WINNERS

glossy foliage and dense habit and can be shaped," Hirvela said. "It's deer resistant but not as shade tolerant, but to the untrained eye × *Pyracomeles* looks like boxwood."

"If shade is a primary consideration for someone trying to replace boxwood, one good alternative is Stonehenge Dark Druid® Yew (*Taxus × media* 'SMNTHDB' PP32419)," Hirvela said. "This one definitely has a nice rounded boxwood-like form that can be trimmed. It's not deer resistant at all but it's very shade tolerant."

### Taller stand-ins

For taller hedges, nurseries have developed several possibilities for boxwood alternatives.

Eastman of Al's Garden & Home said if someone is looking for a hedge to grow about four to six feet tall, one of the most popular sellers is the Emerald Colonnade Holly® (*Ilex* × 'RutHol1' PP23905).

"The foliage color is emerald green like a boxwood and it's upright but still broad enough that it makes a nice hedge," Eastman said. "Japanese holly grows well in shade like regular boxwood does."

Another popular option is from Bailey Nurseries First Editions®. The Chubby Hubby™ Japanese Holly (*Ilex crenata* 'MAD-IC-I' PP32035) grows into a wide,

oval shape for a five to seven foot tall hedge. Straight & Narrow® Japanese Holly (*Ilex crenata* 'PIIC-I' PP29578) becomes an upright, skinny focal point or hedge.

Eastman said false holly (*Osmanthus heterophyllus*) is also a nice broadleaf genus that Al's Garden sells a lot of. It grows upright and can form a four to six foot tall hedge.

"It takes to shearing really well but the difference from boxwood is that it gets covered with fragrant showy white flowers in April," Eastman said. *Osmanthus* has dark foliage and grows well in shade.

The purple-leaf false holly (*Osmanthus heterophyllus* 'Purpureus') grows upright and shears well with striking deep purple leaves.

Other popular alternatives at Al's includes Bailey Nurseries' Chapel View™ Japanese Cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica* 'PIICJ-I'). It grows in a mid-size pyramidal shape with unique blue-green evergreen needles. The Lucky Leu® Leucothoe (*Leucothoe axillaris* 'Bailcothoe') is a mid-size evergreen with early season flowers.

Pink Princess Escallonia (*Escallonia × exoniensis* 'Fradesii') grows to six to eight feet with time and gets flowers," Eastman said. "They're slightly less hardy than other alternatives so it's good for coastal

communities and it's deer resistant."

Sweet Box (*Sarcococca*) grows well in shade and is very popular because it looks similar to boxwood, is easy to shear and doesn't suffer from the same problems as boxwood.

Emerald Boxer™ Holly (*Ilex × crenata* 'RutHol10' PPAF) is a newer one that Monrovia has been testing for a long time. "That one gets a little bigger, about six feet tall, and it takes shearing well for a taller hedge and it's disease and mite resistant," McConnell said.

### Substituting with dwarf conifers

Dwarf conifers like small versions of arborvitae offer more options too.

McEnaney said arborvitae (*Thuja*) is pretty well known and widely used, but there have been some great new introductions recently from Bailey Nurseries First Editions® collection.

He recommended the Planet Earth® Arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'RutThu4' PPAF) with its compact, round shape that requires little to no pruning to maintain a ball-shaped form. Its leaves are dense without any gaps.

Lemon Burst® Arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'RutThu3' PP35206) has yellow new growth and a cone shape and is disease resistant. It's hardy to zones 4–8. ➤➤



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## Boxwood stand-ins



Orangena™ Vaccinium (*Vaccinium brevipedunculatum* 'HINO'GV) is a Monrovia exclusive with small evergreen leaves that hold an orange red hue.. PHOTO COURTESY MONROVIA

From Monrovia, McConnell recommended Mr. Bowling Ball® Arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'Bobozam'). "It keeps a round shape with no shearing so it is a good option whether you want it to stand alone or as a hedge with zero work," McConnell said. Mr. Bowling Ball® is slow growing and will eventually reach about 24 to 30 inches tall and wide.

Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas recently started growing Mr. Bowling Ball® Arborvitae. Fessler said the nursery didn't intend to grow them as replacements for boxwoods, but he has heard they are being used as such in Kentucky and Tennessee where boxwoods have experienced much die off.

### Shifting supply and demand for boxwood

Fessler said the demand for boxwood is still strong.

"Right now a lot of people are still

using boxwoods," Fessler said. "Most of the demand for our business is on the eastern side of the country but also on this side. We've been in this cycle for at least two years now where the demand is outweighing the supply."

Fessler said growers are facing challenges with boxwood so that's why the availability is down.

"Overall boxwoods are short on the market, especially getting up to bigger sizes, and you see this split," Fessler said. "Some customers are looking for alternatives and others are sticking to boxwood and doing the best they can." ☺

*Emily Hoard is an Oregon-based freelance journalist covering business, environmental and agricultural news. She has a background in community reporting and a master's degree in multimedia journalism. You can reach her at [HoardE123@Gmail.com](mailto:HoardE123@Gmail.com)*



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