



'Wintergreen' boxwood shrubs flank the entry to Marge's backyard garden.

Garden Sages/Marge Hols

Can we grow boxwood here? You betcha!

Gardening magazines with a national circulation have an annoying way of ignoring Minnesota gardeners, as if we couldn't grow much of anything here. So it is with an article on boxwood in the latest issue of *The American Gardener*, the American Horticulture Society's magazine.

Now you'd think an article by Lynn Batdorf, who, we're told, has been curator of the National Boxwood Collection at the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. for 36 years, would be an exception; but, no. The only boxwood species he lists for Zone 4 is *Buxus sinica var. insularis*, Korean boxwood, which is usually sold here as *Buxus microphylla var. koreana* 'Wintergreen'.

Now, if boxwood were any old shrub I might let this matter pass. But it's not—it's one of only two precious broadleaf evergreen shrubs we can grow in our Twin Cities gardens (the other being rhododendron). For conveying a year-round sense of structure and order in the garden, it's invaluable.

Until about 15 years ago we thought boxwood too tender for our gardens. I first encountered it in 1996 in the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum's Home Demonstration Garden, where a low hedge of *B. 'Wintergreen'* was growing. I started some 'Wintergreen' cuttings in a plant propagation course that year, and three of those plants form the backbone of my alley garden today. They're dense shrubs about 3x3-feet with small, mid-green leaves that turn bronze in winter. Although growing in full sun, they suffer very little winter burn, just a bit on the newest growth.

Two newer varieties I grow are 'Green Velvet' and 'Glencoe' (trademarked Chicagoland Green). Both are hybrid crosses between *B. m. var. koreana* and *Buxus sempervirens*. They offer the hardiness and compact form of 'Wintergreen', but also retain the dark green color of *B. sempervirens* through winter.

'Green Velvet' forms a handsome 3-foot hedge in my herb garden. It's slow growing and stays in shape with an annual clipping. Six Chicagoland Green boxwoods, which have a spreading, rounded form, add structure to my front-yard garden. Although almost unnoticeable among annuals and perennials in summer, they stand out in the winter garden.

Other hardy boxwood hybrids available at local nurseries are 'Green Mountain,' 'Katerberg' (trademarked North Star), 'Saskatoon' and 'Wilson' (trademarked Northern Charm).

Boxwood prefers neutral to slightly alkaline soil (pH 6.8 to 7.5), making it ideal for most soils in this area. More acidic soils should be amended with slow-acting dolomitic lime. Plants like well-drained loamy soil, very little fertilizer and only one inch of mulch over their shallow roots.