

In praise of box

By R. W. Sidwell

The common box (*Buxus Sempervirens*) is an uncommon native small tree or shrub. It is found wild in some limestone districts of England, notably on the chalk of Box Hill in Surrey and in parts of the Cotswolds. Its ability to form close-textured and dense growth when clipped led to its use for hedges and topiaries whenever these have been in fashion. Its only rival in this field is the yew, also native.

The dwarf edging box, beloved by Victorian gardeners, came to Britain near the end of the Tudor period. Those fanciful creations, the Tudor knot gardens, demanded neat edgings which were permanent and attractive. Parkinson discusses the relative merits of live and dead edgings in his "Paradisi" in 1629. Thrift, germander, lavender cotton and many other herbs were all found wanting in one way or another. He decides: "which lastly, I chiefly and above all other herbs commend unto you, and being a small, lowe, or dwarfe kinde, is called French or Dutch Boxe, and serveth very well to set out any knot." It apparently came to Britain from the Continent.

The landscape movement of the mid 18th century swept away the box edged formal parterres of the century before but the revival of formal gardens in Victorian England saw the return of dwarf box edgings. Now, under the dictates of fashion and labour costs, they have again largely disappeared. The few that remain are rarely cared for as they once were. One clipping a year, in August, is now the usual thing. This means that at the peak of summer when they should be looking at their best they are at their roughest. The first clipping was always completed by the end of June with a second trimming in August to put them right for the winter.

But it was not my intention to dwell on dwarf box edgings when I conceived this article. Where an ordinary garden hedge is required, what plant can equal box? Its roots are less invasive than privet, hawthorn or beech; it is not poisonous to browsing animals, as is yew. It is very dense, easy to clip, and hedge sparrows love to nest in it. True, it is a little slower off the mark in the early stages but that is made up for later when one compares its ease of management with that of ranker growing materials.

One must not suppose that box must always be clipped into formal hedges, peacocks or corkscrews. Left to grow naturally, it makes a very attractive small evergreen tree, as the multi-stemmed specimen in our illustration shows. And in these days, when there is special interest in native trees, how good it is to find a small native tree that is so suitable for many purposes.

It must not be thought that there is a lack of variety within the species. There are more than 20 sorts, either natural varieties of cultivars which may be obtainable if one tries hard enough. Some have large leaves, some small, some are silver variegated, some gold. There are one or two pendulous forms. There is considerable variation in vigour over the whole range. The best way to start is to find a bush with the characters one desires and to take cuttings of one-year-old wood in September/October. Cuttings with a heel are preferred but tip cuttings can be used. Remove the lower leaves and insert for half their length in a sandy compost in an unheated frame. They can be potted up or lined out in nursery rows about six to eight months later.

The box seems to have escaped wide use medicinally in past times, which may seem a little surprising, for medicinal uses were found for most plants. Gerard says it is "of an evil and loathsome smell, not used in medicine" but he does say: "Foolish emperics and women leaches do minister it against the Apoplexie and such diseases." He does not approve.

Perhaps the greatest distinction we can bestow upon the box is that of providing the hardest wood we can produce in Britain — perhaps even the world. It was at one time used for small tool handles. Today the best we can hope for is beech, and plastic is much more likely. I believe it is still regarded as the finest wood for wood engraving but supplies are not plentiful and the price is justifiably high. We have never produced much of our own boxwood. In the middle of last century two to three thousand tons were imported annually at around £10 per ton. It came mostly from the eastern Mediterranean. It takes at least a century to produce worthwhile timber. Two or three centuries is better. Any Vale grower looking for a long term crop might like to consider it.



Box tree on lawn at Bromcroft Castle.