

Colonial Williamsburg

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Boxwood Blight Strikes Colonial Williamsburg



[Image courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation]

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WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (Sept. 16, 2021) – Colonial Williamsburg has a new, unwelcome guest. Boxwood blight, a highly contagious fungal infection that affects boxwood but has no effect on humans or animals, has arrived in the historic area. Despite its existence in Virginia since 2011 – with diagnosed cases within 2,000 feet of the historic area for the last two years – Colonial Williamsburg’s proactive education and outreach efforts have managed to keep the disease at bay for longer than anyone expected.

“We knew it was inevitable,” said Joanne Chapman, Director of Landscape Services at The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “but being able to delay boxwood blight for as long as we did

put us in the best possible position to deal with it quickly and effectively. We had a protocol in place that we developed in partnership with Virginia Tech's Boxwood Blight Task Force so we were really as prepared as we could be.”

That preparedness paid off. The first case of boxwood blight was discovered by a member of Colonial Williamsburg's maintenance team on July 29, 2021. Despite having no background in horticulture, he had been trained to spot the disease and was able to alert Chapman and her team who sprang into action to contain the fungus. Since then, boxwood blight has been identified and mitigated in gardens at four Colonial Williamsburg sites: the Ludwell-Paradise House, Providence Hall, the St. George Tucker House, and the Governor's Palace.

Taking Action

There is no cure for boxwood blight. The only way to address the fungus is to remove the infected plant, and plants can be infected before they show symptoms. The removal of the boxwood – many of which are over 100 years old - is a great loss to the Foundation, but a necessary step to protect the rest of the Foundation's collection of approximately 8,000 boxwoods.

The extent of the infection dictates mitigation efforts. At the Ludwell-Paradise House and the West Privy Garden at the Governor's Palace, all of the boxwood had to be meticulously removed and destroyed in order to prevent transmission. At Providence Hall and the St. George Tucker House, only the diseased portions of the plants were removed, and the remaining plants were fenced and netted to create a physical barrier. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation is working closely with experts including T. Michael Linkins and Virginia Tech's Boxwood Blight Task Force and a group of international scientists led by the Dr. Chuanxue Hong, Professor of Plant Pathology at Virginia Tech University, to determine the best mitigation technique in each scenario as it arises.

Understanding the problem

Boxwood blight is spread when insects, animals, people and gardening tools come into contact with infected shrubs and unknowingly transfer the sticky spores of the fungus to healthy boxwood. Early symptoms include circular, tan leaf spots, often with a darker border; linear, black stem lesions on infected green stems; and sudden and severe leaf drop particularly from the lower region of the plants.

The only defense against boxwood blight is prevention. In addition to temporarily closing positive and highly valuable gardens to the public, landscape staff and subcontractors have been trained in boxwood blight detection and are actively scouting gardens on a daily basis. Boxwoods are being proactively treated and all landscaping equipment that could transmit the fungus is sanitized after use on all sites with boxwoods.

Looking forward

The battle against boxwood blight is not likely to end any time soon. According to Chapman, the only long-term solution is to slowly replant with blight-resistance boxwood which are smaller than their English and American Boxwood forebearers. Chapman and her team can also replicate the look of some of the lost boxwood hedges with yaupon, an evergreen shrub which can be found throughout the historic area, including the maze behind the Governor's Palace. In some cases, lost boxwood will be replaced with other period plants. “This is an opportunity to true-up the gardens,” said Joanne. “Would this many boxwood have really been here in the 18th century? It's unlikely.” In consultation with colleagues from Colonial Williamsburg's Museums,

Preservation and Historic Resources (MPHR) division, Chapman and her team will work to introduce more historically accurate biodiversity to the gardens.

The task ahead is daunting. Vigilance, thoroughness, and an unwavering commitment to continued education and best practices will help Colonial Williamsburg preserve as many of its original boxwoods as possible. Through the process, the Foundation will serve as a resource to other organizations and individuals dealing with boxwood blight as the fungus continues to spread throughout the state and across the nation. Visit [Colonial Williamsburg's website](#) to learn more about boxwood blight, and lend your support through the [City Beautiful Fund](#) to help save the historic boxwoods.

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The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation preserves, restores and operates Virginia's 18th-century capital of Williamsburg. Innovative and interactive experiences highlight the relevance of the American Revolution to contemporary life and the importance of an informed, active citizenry. The Colonial Williamsburg experience includes more than 600 restored or reconstructed original buildings, renowned museums of decorative arts and folk art, extensive educational outreach programs for students and teachers, lodging, culinary options from historic taverns to casual or elegant dining, the Golden Horseshoe Golf Club featuring 45 holes designed by Robert Trent Jones and his son Rees Jones, a full-service spa and fitness center, pools, retail stores and gardens. Philanthropic support and revenue from admissions, products and hospitality operations sustain Colonial Williamsburg's educational programs and preservation initiatives.