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And All the Trimmings

Snips of Boxwood Put the Green in Christmas

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Skilled sheep shearers can get the wool off a ewe in two shakes of a lamb's tail. Arcadio Rios has his own lightning-quick technique, except his objective is a 15-foot boxwood hedge.

Snip, snip, snip go the red Felco pruners, and in a few seconds he is holding a fistful of plump green sprigs of Old Dominion manna, the stinky shrub that to some nostrils suggests a holy link to Colonial America and to others a nest of feral cats.

Love it or hate it, boxwood is the classic greenery of Christmas. It is the elegant building block of wreaths and garlands, and its waxy leaves retain moisture and make it one of the longest-lasting greens you can find. This has florists from Boston to Miami covetously eyeing our region: The mid-Atlantic is to boxwood what the Napa Valley is to the grape and Vidalia, Ga., to the onion. Rios has been pruning like crazy since September.

One of 15 harvesters for Virginia Boxwood Co., he and his colleagues will have spent the fall gathering hundreds of thousands of pounds of boxwood cuttings before hanging up their Felcos this week. "Naz trains them as artists," said B.J. Fleming, the company's northern manager. She is referring to Nazerano Amatucci, owner of the Charlottesville-based enterprise. He tells his cutters to imagine a frame on the side of the hedge, defined by their reach. Within each, the harvester moves high and low, left and right, taking 12-inch cuttings without leaving the boxwood looking scalped -- while perched atop a 12-foot apple picker's ladder.

"It's hard to get on a ladder and do what these men do," said Amatucci. Most of his workers are from Mexico. The most skilled, like Rios, will always have their eye on the next sprig and their hands will follow, said Amatucci. It is one fluid movement. He sees it as a sort of boxwood ballet. It also is part of a strange barter. Amatucci's workers care for the boxwood -- mulching, feeding and treating for pests -- in return for the clippings. The pruning, if done correctly, will also improve the health of boxwood. Indeed, on the variety known as English boxwood, thinning the vegetation is vital to its survival.

The company charges new clients for restoring sick and neglected boxwood, he said. Once the boxwood is part of the harvesting cycle, the crews return every second year to harvest American box and every third for the slower-growing English version.

Amatucci's autumn quest takes him to some of the most venerated boxwood enclaves in America, in old cities and towns and in rural estates and old plantations in Virginia, Maryland and parts of West Virginia. A few are house museums such as Oatlands near Leesburg; others are private houses, old places where the

boxwood has seen generations come and go, along with fresh owners.

In the historic part of Warrenton, Fleming and her crew spent two days recently trimming the colossal boxwood gardens belonging to Elizabeth and Jay Norman. The couple moved to the property this summer and are finishing a renovation of their unique house, built in traditional Virginia brick and slate but modern in style and Mediterranean in feel. The four-acre grounds are also distinctive, with a formal pool terrace framed at one end by double rows of American boxwood that rise as high as 20 feet. At the other end, similarly sized boxwood form an enclosed lawn of about half an acre. The grounds are home to old specimen trees, including a big sourwood tree and large weeping Japanese maples.

For the Normans, the imposing hedges of American box have become a living reminder that they are not so much the new owners of the property as its current stewards.

Elizabeth Norman recalls the first time she stumbled across the boxwood gardens during an early visit. "I went around the back and the gravity of the situation struck me. This is really special. This is something that needs to be taken care of and preserved."

Amatucci sees this phenomenon all the time. There is something about these hedges that speaks to people. The smell and the way you can hide inside them conjure childhood memories for some. And their age triggers a sober urge to protect them.

Some owners have lived with their boxwoods into old age, and are highly protective of them, said Amatucci. To be in the presence of 250-year-old box in some Virginia plantations, he said, is awe-inspiring.

The classic form of the evergreen is the English box, which has been used for centuries in the United States and Europe for edging walks and framing garden beds. It grows just an inch or so a year, and nice specimens form billowing shrubs that come up to your chest, but after a century or two it can get to be as tall as George Washington (north of six feet). American box is a tree form that is used for high hedging and is more typically found between Charlottesville and Washington, Amatucci said.

English box, being naturally dense, is prone to several fungal diseases best countered with pruning. Shearing the shrubs, a technique popular in Europe where the climate is gentler, is torture to them here. But selective pruning, sometimes called plucking because the stems can be ripped off the brittle wood, will open up air and light, encourage thicker growth and minimize problems with *Volutella* and other diseases. Unchecked, these fungi spread from leaf to wood and cause major disfiguring dieback.

Do the experts approve of these boxwood harvesters? Dean Norton, director of horticulture at Mount Vernon, said some of the healthiest boxwood he has seen "were plants that were nearly decimated by garden clubs many years ago. The plants responded favorably."

Although American boxwood doesn't suffer so much from the fungal diseases, it does benefit from thinning, especially if thick and neglected. Norton wonders how a company with lots of clients can patrol hedges for pests in a timely manner. "But as far as the pruning, it's good and necessary," he said. Amatucci said his crews use, in part, a systemic insecticide to kill the leaf miner, a major pest of American boxwood.

Lynn Batdorf, the National Arboretum's curator of boxwood, says certain rules should be followed so that pruning helps rather than harms a plant. You shouldn't take out too much of the vegetation. Removing branches more than a quarter-inch across can trigger an ugly, dense regrowth, he said.

You also need to make cuts that will encourage the correct type of regrowth. "The branch you leave becomes the new leader and has to have the space to grow," he said. You don't want it to grow closely parallel to an existing branch or to cross another. He also recommended using pruners, not hand plucking, to minimize the pruning wound.

"If you have large numbers of boxwood, of course you can't do it alone, but anyone with five or six boxwood, it's therapeutic to go out with pruners and spend half an hour to thin the boxwood yourself," he said.

Virginia Boxwood Co. can be reached at 800-362-8424. A new edition of Lynn Batdorf's handbook on boxwood varieties, pests and care is now available. The Boxwood Handbook costs \$22 and is published by the American Boxwood Society, <http://www.boxwoodsociety.org>.

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