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They clip it here and ship it there

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Chances are a wreath, garland or kissing ball hung for the holidays in places as far-flung as Boston and San Antonio contains boxwood grown right here in Virginia.

Nazerano "Naz" Amatucci Jr. and his crew from Virginia Boxwood Co. have spent the fall trimming the shrubs that grow so prolifically across the state, and shipping the clippings to florists in places where they don't grow at all.

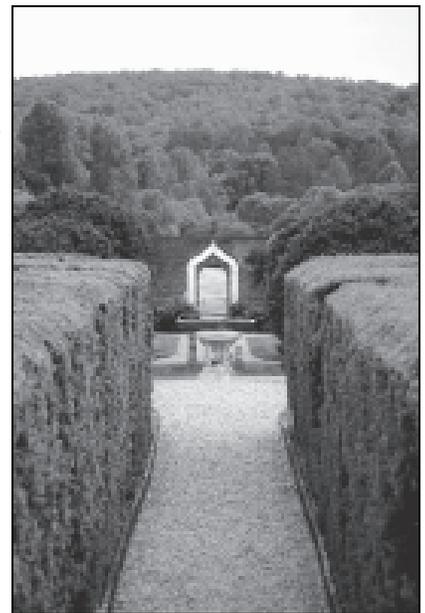
"I'm just slammed," Amatucci said last week. "We have a curtain call, and then no more orders."

Virginia Boxwood is based in Charlottesville, but he and his employees spend most of the year maintaining the shrubby evergreens at places ranging from VMI and Washington & Lee University in Lexington to Montpelier in Orange County to the Fredericksburg City Cemetery and adjoining Confederate Cemetery, which are at William Street and Washington Avenue.

"There are tons of boxwood in Virginia," said Amatucci, who is a horticulturist. "It's probably the single largest-volume evergreen plant introduced to central Virginia."

Colonists brought the first boxwoods here in the 1700s, and the ornamental shrub, a symbol of immortality since the days of the ancient Egyptians, was soon gracing the gardens of such places as the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg, Mount Vernon near Alexandria and even the White House in Washington.

The sturdy plant, which does well in the Mid-Atlantic, was popular because it could be clipped into hedges to define garden paths and beds or into



Virginia Boxwood Co. takes care of boxwoods throughout the state, including these at Montpelier.



intricate topiaries as accents. Left untouched, however, it grows into green clouds of foliage.



That's where Virginia Boxwood Co. comes in. Amatucci charges a fee for the initial visit to treat boxwood plants, then rehabilitates and maintains them for free in exchange for the clippings. Most of these are wholesaled to florists as is, although the company is starting to make boxwood wreaths and garlands for the wholesale market as well.

Virginia Boxwood Co. ships clippings, some made into wreaths, all over North America.

"One of our best clients is in San Antonio," Amatucci said. "We also ship to the Boston market, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Miami and Canada, for some reason. Wherever boxwood doesn't grow, there's a demand for our product."

Amatucci began working for Virginia Boxwood Co. in 1993, and bought the business 11 years later. Today it's a family operation, with Amatucci out in the field with his crew of about 14 employees, and son Jason running the office and managing sales. While the company's name remains the same, shipment boxes also say "Amatucci Family Greens."

Virginia Boxwood begins work each year in early spring before boxwood's buds break open. The crew trims then, and again from mid-September through mid-December. They also thin the shrubs periodically and give them a shot of a slow-release organic fertilizer to encourage growth.

"The No. 1 problem is that most of the boxwood we see are misplanted," Amatucci said. "They're either too close to the house and grow 20 feet tall, or were planted on a southwest exposure and get wind burn."

Boxwood actually prefers a well-drained, alkaline soil, and the English variety especially needs to be thinned and dead leaves cleaned out periodically to prevent disease.

"I'll get people crying on the phone because their boxwood is dying and they've had it for years," Amatucci said.

He and his son hope to expand the sales end of the business by creating more value-added products such as wreaths and drumming up more sales in the spring.

"Our customers in Boston say: 'Boxwood is Christmas. As soon as Christmas is over, I'm done,'" Amatucci said. "We think we can promote boxwood for Valentine's Day, Easter and Mother's Day."

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