

Buxus Blight - *Cylindrocladium buxicola*



You only need to do a quick Google search and you will find a range of articles about Buxus blight. The main conclusion is that there is very little you can do once your plants have been infected. Buxus blight is widespread throughout the UK and Europe and is now gaining a foothold in New Zealand. It used to only be an issue in Auckland and Taranaki, but we are now receiving more and more calls about it in Wellington from people who have entire hedges dying back. We have made the decision to stop growing Buxus as we didn't want to be selling plants knowing this devastating disease is out there and could potentially affect the plants we sell. We were growing 12000 – 15000 units per year, so it was not a decision we took lightly to remove a \$100,000 crop from our production. So what is Buxus Blight, what does it do and what measures can you take?

There are two fungi that cause blight in Box and they often appear together. *Volutella buxi* has been around for a long time and causes browning and dieback of branches. The tell tale sign is pink spores on the underside of leaves which are spread by water. Fallen leaves carry the disease over the winter and new spores are produced in the spring. They enter the plant through wounds and cut stems.

The concern is for the other fungi, *Cylindrocladium buxicola* which produces similar symptoms to *Volutella*. The spores are capable of penetrating the cuticle so wounding is not necessary for infection to occur.

The photos below show an established hedge affected by the blight. What started as a few bald patches quickly spread across the top of the entire hedge. The individual stems dropped all their leaves and the centres just completely died out.



Symptoms

- Black streaks and spots on the leaves.
- Complete dieback of stems. Big bare patches appear all over the plant.
- In wet conditions you may be able to see the white spores on the underside of the leaves.

Prevention

- Avoid overhead watering. Use a 'drip' hose or water the soil only.
- Keep the hedge slightly open and clean tools as you go.
- Remove fallen leaves from inside of the hedge and tidy up clippings once trimmed.
- Only plant infection free plants from trusted suppliers. The disease sets in so quickly though, it is hard to determine where it came from first.
- Spray regularly with a suitable fungicide. Can help keep it at bay.
- Clean tools and be careful of having gardeners trim your hedges, especially if they maintain Buxus in other gardens.

Unfortunately there is no known fungicide that will combat the blight. Many commercial sprays including copper can slow down the symptoms or keep them at bay but once the plants are removed from nursery sites and into the home garden they can quickly decline if not regularly sprayed and they are exposed to the blight.

The spores travel via air so if you are remote enough from your neighbours you may never have a problem, however in suburban gardens the fungi can quickly travel around the neighbourhood.

If your hedge is still healthy and relatively clean it would be beneficial to start a regular spray program. Copper or any other suitable fungicide should help keep the disease at bay.

There has been some talk of a spray called Mancozeb being effective. We have purchased this spray for trials and will let you know how it works out. Our concern is that is not cheap and if it needs to be sprayed quite regularly then it may not be suitable for many people. Our other concern is how effective it is as a preventative or as a curative. We will let you know how it goes.

We feel that stand alone Buxus topiary such as balls, cones, standards and the pillar 'Graham Blandy' **may** fare better as they have more air movement around them and are easier to clean the trimmings up from as well as to spray. As we get more information we will update this.

However if you have any sign of infection we believe the best option is to remove the diseased plants and get replacements in as quick as possible. Now I know you would expect us to say this as we are in the business of selling plants, but you can easily waste a couple of seasons spraying, trimming and hoping but in this same time frame the hedge could have established and given the garden a fresh new appeal.

There are a number of suitable alternatives that are well worth looking at.

We recommend spacing these smaller options at 4-5 per metre and for taller hedges 3-4 per metre.

This will allow the hedge to knit together nicely and should flush out over a couple of seasons.

Eunomyus 'Emerald Gem' seems to be a forerunner as the new box hedge. Dark glossy green leaves, a tidy, hardy and compact plant that is slightly quicker growing than Buxus. ***Lonicera nitida*** or the box honeysuckle is a classic hedging plant that due to its quick growing nature will quickly establish. On the flip side this is also its downfall as it needs regular trimming. The Lonicera family also has the bright yellow form of ***L. 'Lemon Beauty'*** and the attractive larger leaf of ***Lonicera pileata***. Naturally this has a mounding habit but it clips very well into a tidy shape. ***Ilex hillerii*** is another good looking option and the holly family's answer to box. The new growth has a pleasant yellowy tinge but darkens as it matures. It seems to clip well and retain a tidy shape. The above choices are great for providing a similar look to a green box hedge. If you need something a bit taller (50cm – 1m) or are looking for something slightly different you should consider the following.

Escallonia 'Red Dream' is a dwarf form of this fast growing hedge. Small, glossy green leaves contrast well with the red stems. Small pinky-red flowers in spring add to the appeal. ***Teucrium fruticans*** is another classic hedge that is making a comeback. Valued for its silver foliage it grows very quickly so does need a regular clip. Corokia are popular native choices but the new ***Corokia 'Pipsqueak'*** is a standout. This dwarf form has deep green leaves but silver

stems giving a neat shimmer. Many ***Hebe*** and in particularly the smaller leaved ***disomifolia*** will work well but do need a regular clip. This also applies to the wide range of ***Coprosma*** and the many different leaf colours that are available.



Eunomyus 'Emerald Gem'

- Lush green foliage that doesn't dull.
- Quick to establish with similar trimming.
- Tidy attractive form.
- Plant 4 – 5 per metre.



Ilex hillerii

- Battered yellow leaf, deepens to dark green.
- Compact and bushy habit.
- Slow, tight growing form. Trims well.
- Plant 4 – 5 per metre.