

Bedford Farmers Club Timely Tips

June 2019

Soil Your Undies Challenge Update, Boxwood Blight, Stonecrop Gardens

Soil Your Undies Challenge

In April, Jim Wood & Mary Farley alerted me to an ongoing challenge that farming organizations across North America have been taking. The Soil Your Undies Challenge determines the “health” of your soil. Is it teeming with life (microbes, worms, fungi, etc.) and thus very healthy, or is it dead as a doornail and needs enrichment? The challenge procedure is to bury a pair of 100% cotton underwear



in the topsoil layer of your garden, then dig them up after two months. If your soil is healthy, you may find only the non-organic, elastic waistband of the underwear. The organic matter from the undies will have been “eaten” and recycled into the soil. In April, I buried two pairs of cotton boxers in my gardens at home. I dug them up this morning. My undies remained pretty much intact.

I believe part of the reason I failed yet another challenge (Jim Wood beat me at the Daffodil Race Challenge earlier this Spring) is due to our cold, dark spring. I also “planted” my underwear. I placed them deeper into the ground than others who participated in the challenge. Some videos of other “challengers” show them scraping topsoil away with their hands, placing the undies in the cleared area, and then covering them with just a few inches of soil. I went whole hog and really buried my underwear, a good 6-8” into the ground. I’ll try again and report back in September.

In the meantime, if you too failed the challenge and need to improve the health of your soil you should consider the following:

1. Minimize disturbance in your garden beds. Allow roots to decompose in place.
2. Add compost.
3. Keep soil covered at all times. Mulches (leaves, pine needles, wood chips, straw and shredded newspaper) will slowly decompose and improve your soil structure and fertility.
4. Maximize plant diversity. The more kinds of roots in the soil, the more soil microbes.
5. Avoid applying fungicides, herbicides, &/or pesticides to your soil.
6. Do not apply phosphorus to your soil unless a soil test says it is necessary. Phosphorus discourages growth of fungi.

Boxwood Blight

While we were touring Caramoor last month the Jeff Haydon, Caramoor C.E.O., mentioned how the

boxwoods in the sunken garden had been removed due to boxwood blight. I thought it might be interesting to follow up with a little bit more information about this blight and how to deal with it. Even Sav A Tree sent out a postcard, just last week, regarding the blight.

The blight is a fungal disease caused by *Calonectria pseudonaviculata*. It was first detected in North America in October 2011. It is now in more than 20 states and spreading. It also infects pachysandra. The blight loves high humidity, and can cause rapid defoliation, which begins in the lower branches and moves upward. Look for narrow black streaks or cankers on stems, and white fuzzy masses that emerge from these cankers.

The fungus can overwinter on the infected plant and in infected leaf litter. It can last in the soil for up to 5 years. Therefore, you do NOT want to compost any infected plants, or plant in the infected soil. You should either burn, bury, or trash bag the infected plants. There is no cure for the blight, only prevention. Fungicides can protect disease free plants, but can not save those with the blight.

If you have boxwoods, or want to purchase them:

- Purchase boxwoods from nurseries that participate in a boxwood blight compliance agreement.
- Don't trim/shear boxwoods when they are wet to reduce the chance of spreading any disease.
- Disinfect your tools as you move from bush to bush.

Cornell Cooperative Extension has a [page of frequently asked questions](#) about the blight, as well as some replacement ideas for your box woods.

Stonecrop Gardens

I'm very tired of gardening - for now. I've been digging, planting, digging, transplanting, and digging some more all Spring. I won't even go into weeding. Although I love my gardens, it's at this time of year that I need a little break from them. This is the time I like to visit other gardens, see other plants, and just take a rest.



I visited a beauty over Memorial Day weekend: [Stonecrop Gardens](#) in Cold Spring! It is located just minutes off the Taconic on Route 301. It was originally the home of Anne and Frank Cabot. Mr. Cabot was Chairman of the NYBG and in 1989 founded the Garden Conservancy. He knew a thing or two about gardens!

The current Director is Caroline Burgess.

Stonecrop is set in the Hudson Highlands and is on about 15 acres. There are woodland and water gardens, a grass garden, alpine stone beds, cliff rock gardens, and an English style garden with the most beautiful obelisks for climbing plants. There is also a floating 2000 sq ft Conservatory, and display greenhouses featuring alpines, tropicals, and succulents. A "Pit House" with with teeny weeny bulbs, and systematic order beds representing 50 plant families round out the grounds.

It is open Monday through Saturday 10-5pm, and on some Sundays. The general admission fee is \$10. Seniors get in for \$5. It is a marvel of plant life. I hope you take a drive and see for yourself!