

Shrub and Boxwood Dieback

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator (kfeehan2@unl.edu, 402-563-4901)

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Shrubshrubs are plants whose stems are not as hardy as their roots and they may die back to near the ground over winter. Don't be in a hurry to remove such shrubs. Give them a chance to start new growth.

These shrubs are known as suffrutescent as opposed to woody or herbaceous. They retain a woody base but have semi-woody stems.

Examples include butterfly bush or Buddleia, blue mist Spirea, beautyberry, Russian sage and perennial hibiscus.

Each spring, the dead wood needs to be removed. After a mild winter, the amount of pruning needed may be minimal. After a cold winter, such as we just experienced, shrubs can die back to the ground.

When this occurs, plants are slower to begin new growth in spring. It might be assumed the plant is dead and it is removed too soon.

As a rule, give shrubs like butterfly bush, blue mist Spirea and beautyberry until about June before giving up on them and replacing them.

Dying back to near the ground does not affect blooming as most of these plants only bloom on current years wood. This characteristic actually helps increase blooming as all of the wood is current.

Another shrub that often appears dead in spring is boxwood. A larger than normal percentage have turned brown this winter.

The browning is caused by winter dessication. The problem is selecting and planting the wrong plant in the location. Boxwood needs to be planted in a fairly shady site protected from wind, and receive adequate water all season.

Boxwoods are evergreen. When plants remain green all year, the leaves continue to lose water during winter. In cold or dry soils, the lost water cannot be replaced and leaf and stem tissue dries out with leaves turning brown from late winter into spring.

As with shrubs, wait until June. If boxwood sends out new growth, it might slowly recover. However, it is likely to continue to have the same issue each year. If a plant is completely brown with no new growth by late May, it will need to be removed.

The best way to reduce winter dessication in boxwood is to only plant them in protected locations and provide adequate water throughout summer and fall. Avoid overwatering; and any pruning or fertilization after mid-July.

During winter, when air temperatures are above 40 F degrees, lightly water the soil around boxwoods. Know that winter watering is not nearly as beneficial as summer and fall watering.

Another option is to screen the shrubs with burlap or snow fencing to protect them from prevailing winds or apply an antidessicant, such as Wilt-Pruf, two to three times during winter.

A great option is also to select a different shrub that is better adapted to the location and to Nebraska's winter climate.