



By Barbara Elmore, HCMG

Thinking Outside of the Box (wood)

Shrub-planting time is upon us, and I face the same dilemmas I did last year as I look at the area around my shady front porch.

Dilemma 1: Most of my perennials, many of which reach shrub-height, are not evergreen. That translates to a bleak-looking winter landscape.

Dilemma 2: Many shrubs prefer full sun instead of partial shade.

Dilemma 3: I don't want to add boxwoods. I was happy to move into a yard with a blank slate that I could develop as I wished. I don't wish for boxwoods, even though they are evergreen, tough, and not required by law to assume a box shape. You can also keep them to a compact height. For all of these reasons, the boxwood is a popular choice of gardeners.

But in the spirit of out of the boxwood thinking, I am shopping for shrubs appropriate to my situation and considering several listed below. Maybe you will find some ideas here, or have some of your own to send me. I would enjoy hearing about your experience.

1. **Cast iron plant**, *Aspidistra elatior*. Ok, this is not a shrub, but it does get a couple feet tall, tolerates all kinds of weather and poor soil, and likes dry shade. Those are the pros. The cons: It's a notoriously slow-growing plant and it does not flower – or at least not to speak of.

2. **American beautyberry**, *Callicarpa americana*. This IS a shrub and one that thrives in our soils. Some of its good points include its yummy-looking purple fruit and yellow-green fall foliage. But once the leaves drop, it looks a bit scraggly. It needs lots of room to spread out, too – between 3 and 5 feet.



3. **Yaupon holly**, *Ilex vomitoria*. This one gets tall (12-45 feet) but it is evergreen and shade suits it just fine.

Perhaps this shrub is best in front of an exterior wall but away from a porch. Another plus is the berry, usually a beautiful red. Berries grow in great profusion on the female yaupon.

4. **Texas mountain laurel**, *Sophora secundiflora*. Yes, this can also be a tree – it can get 30 feet tall –so consider that when planting. It does grow slowly, however, and its normal mature height is about 15 feet. It is evergreen and offers the added benefit of showy and aromatic flowers in early spring. It also tolerates dry growing conditions.

How about cast-iron plants and columbines in that shady spot? According to a Bexar County Extension Agent, plants that are extra hardy, such as dwarf yaupon and dwarf burford hollies, aspidistra (cast-iron plant) and nandina do not die except in the case of prolonged, severe freezes.

5. **Evergreen sumac**, *Rhus virens*. This is another tall shrub, growing from 8 to 12 feet. It is evergreen and produces blooms and orange-red fruit. It is drought-tolerant and part shade is OK.

Most of these ideas are from the Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center website, www.wildflower.org. To find plants, click on the "Explore Plants" tab at the top of the page. Scroll down until you see the U.S. map, then click on your state. You may have to do this twice. When your area comes up, look on the right side of the page under "Explore Plants" and see "Narrow Your Search." Here you can plug in your state, what kind of plant you want, and other information.

Then decide and get planting – spring is just around the corner.