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# GEORGIA GARDENING



GEORGIA'S OWN GUIDE TO GREAT GARDENING & LANDSCAPING

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# Fresh Foundations

Add some pizzazz to your plantings with these choices

By Helen Newling Lawson

**Foundation plantings – usually evergreen shrubs – have always had a reputation for being boring.** To

make matters worse, many of the South's go-to choices are now also suffering from a host of disease and insect problems.

Luckily, there are several new introductions that make fantastic, low-maintenance substitutions with similar growth habits. Some even offer a fresh twist with colorful foliage or flowers that can add some pizzazz to your plantings.

▲ The foliage of 'Sunshine' ligustrum adds a vibrant accent to your landscape. In this landscape, moving it away from the perimeter of the house created a brightly lit entryway path. Credit: Courtesy of Southern Living Plant Collection

## WHAT'S THE TROUBLE?

If your foundation plantings are failing, one of these could be the reason why:

**Boxwood blight** – Caused by a fungus, this disease was first seen in the Southeast in Virginia in 2011 and had spread south to Georgia by 2013. It causes brown leaf spots and defoliation of boxwood shrubs (*Buxus* spp.) and can also affect *Pachysandra* and sweetbox (*Sarcococca*). It spreads by contact, so buy plants from a nursery that participates in a boxwood blight management program. There is no cure – fungicides can only be used as a preventive.

**Leaf spot** – *Entomosporium maculatum*, the same fungus responsible for taking out red tip *Photinia*, has now claimed numerous Indian hawthorns (*Rhaphiolepis* spp.) as its victims. Tiny red spots on both sides of the leaves are the first sign of trouble. These can progress into large gray spots with maroon edges, then leaf drop, and eventually death of the plant when leaf drop is severe. Moisture encourages spread of this disease, so



clean up diseased leaves quickly (bagging, not composting) and try to keep the upper branches dry by irrigating at the soil level.

**Shot hole disease** – Although it may look as though an insect is munching holes in your English laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus* ‘Otto Luyken’) leaves, it is actually a sign of a bacterial disease. Wet leaves also enable this disease to spread, so avoid overhead watering and give your shrubs enough space to dry quickly.

**Scale insects** – These insects spend their adulthood attached to branches of numerous shrubs – including juniper, *Euonymus*, and *Cleyera* – feeding on their sap. If your plants are yellowing or declining, look for white, gray, or brown “bumps” lining the branches. You may also notice ants or black sooty “mold” (actually a fungus), both results of the sap secretions. Treatment depends on the species of scale and their life stage (active “crawler” or attached adult), so call your local extension office for help.

**Just plain ugly** – This may not hurt the plant, but it can be hard on the eyes. *Eleagnus* (sometimes called “ugly Agnes”) and *Euonymus* are two commonly planted-but-often-loathed shrubs. (Former *Southern Living* editor Steve Bender, writing as the “Grumpy Gardener,” described golden euonymus as “the awfulest of the awful” things you can plant in front of your house.)

And sometimes, there’s nothing wrong with the shrub other than the fact that it’s just too big to serve as a foundation plant.

Our builder installed five *Loropetalum* shrubs in a 10-foot-square area below our dining room window. They were a fairly new introduction at the time – our house was built 15 years ago – so maybe they didn’t realize each one would ultimately grow to at least



▲ **Shades of Pink viburnum** has glossy, dark green leaves and pink flowers and is a great substitute for Indian hawthorn. Credit: Courtesy of Greenleaf Nursery

**Top photo: *Distylium*** (shown here: Blue Cascade ‘PIIDIST-II’) is a tougher, disease-resistant alternative to cherry laurels, junipers, hollies, Indian hawthorn, and boxwood. Credit: Courtesy of GardenersConfidence.com

15 feet tall and wide, or more likely, they just didn’t care. (Since then, a number of dwarf varieties of *Loropetalum* have come onto the market much better suited for foundation plantings.)

I ripped out four of the five to allow one enough space. Instead of constantly pruning the one remaining, I tried to limb it up into a small tree. However, it has refused to accept its new identity, so rather than wasting time pruning, I keep cutting back sprouts from the base of the trunk. I’ve decided it’s time to part, and will replace it with an actual small tree.

#### WHAT’S FRESH?

New introductions offer many different options. Most of these recommendations have a compact, tidy growth habit, saving you the tiresome maintenance of pruning. Be sure to check the expected mature size to make sure you’re choosing an option that best fits your space and remember, “dwarf” just means smaller than the species.

Whether they burst into bloom, have a “first flush” of color on their new growth, or have a unique hue all year, most of these choices add the excitement of color to their reliable nature.

No “bad seeds.” Plants such as *Ligustrum* and barberry (*Berberis* spp.) had a well-deserved bad reputation for invasiveness. Newer varieties have been bred to be sterile, keeping them only where you want them.

Above all, each of these has exceptional resistance to disease, drought, insects, deer, or all of the above. Each offers a significant improvement over its predecessors.

#### SOME PROMISING NEW STARS

***Distylium*** – This evergreen, low-growing shrub is billed as resistant to insect, disease, and deer problems – a resistance “home run” that can replace problem-prone ‘Otto Luyken’ laurel as a reliable foundation or backbone planting, with layered branches that provide texture and require little to no pruning.

**October Magic Ruby camellia** (*C. sasanqua* ‘Green 02-003’) – Imagine a tidy evergreen hedge of glossy, deep green



leaves that bursts into flower every fall with striking, fully double red flowers. Who said foundation shrubs were boring?

***Ligustrum sinense* 'Sunshine'**

– Spread a little 'Sunshine' to add the trendiest color in gardening today, golden yellow, to your landscape. If you're up on your botanical names, you know that we're talking about privet, which comes with its own bad reputation for invasiveness, so rest assured this variety is sterile and will not reseed. (Note: In Tennessee, by law, *L. sinense* – including sterile cultivars – **cannot** be propagated, sold, offered for sale, or released within the state. – Ed.)

**Bottom right: Eureka Gold dwarf yaupon (*Ilex vomitoria* 'HOGY') is another option for bringing bright yellow-green foliage into your plant palette. Dense, bushy plants grow 4-5 feet tall.**  
Credit: Courtesy of Greenleaf Nursery

▼ **Love the look of a tidy row of clipped shrubs but hate shearing? Micron holly maintains its low, mounded shape without pruning and is a great substitute for boxwood.**  
Credit: Courtesy of Greenleaf Nursery

**Moonlit Lace viburnum (*Viburnum* x 'sPg-3-024')** – A cross between *V. tinus* and *V. davidii*, this shrub has glossy, textured, evergreen leaves with showy, rounded clusters of white flowers that appear in spring, making it a drought-tolerant, similarly sized replacement for Indian hawthorn. Shades of Pink (*V. tinus* 'Lisa Rosa') is another lovely choice, but can reach up to 5 feet tall if unpruned.

***Pittosporum*** – Another Indian hawthorn substitution. As a bonus, its small flowers bring a wonderful fragrance in spring, perfect for an entryway.

**Micron holly (*Ilex vomitoria* 'Gremicr')** – Want the traditional look of neatly clipped shrubs with no shearing? This slow-growing, very compact dwarf variety has a "very interesting texture" and a tidy, mounded shape.

To give your new stars their best chance to shine, take the time to plant them right.

First, amend the soil with organic matter, such as compost. If poor drainage contributed to past problems, you should definitely pay attention to this step.





Next, plan your placement. While it may look sparse (especially if you are replacing overgrown shrubs), make sure to space them to allow for their mature size. And even though they're called foundation shrubs, don't cram them too close to the house. They'll look better, stay healthier, and attract fewer bugs to your home if you give them some breathing space.

Or, instead of using them to line the foundation of your house, make them the foundation of a standalone planting bed. These evergreen workhorses are a great way to add structure and backbone to any area. I recently used a



◀ **Mojo pittosporum (*P. tobira* 'CNI Three')** has variegated, shade-tolerant foliage and a delightful springtime fragrance. Yet it's tough enough to handle even salt spray in coastal areas. Credit: Courtesy of Southern Living Plant Collection

curving row of 'Sunshine' ligustrum to add a bold sweep of unifying color through the center of my perennial bed.

Finally, take the time to dig good holes. This means wider, not deeper, than their containers. Water well when planting and during their first year to get them established. Read up on their particular care requirements to see when and how to fertilize. ♻️

Helen Newling Lawson is a freelance writer, marketing professional, and Master Gardener Extension Volunteer.



## Out with the Old!

**If you're replacing troubled shrubs, you'll first need to get rid of them:**

- Call 8-1-1 before you dig ([call811.com](http://call811.com))
- Use bypass loppers to prune back branches to the main trunk. Be sure to wear gloves, protective clothing, and safety glasses.
- Use a chain saw if needed to cut back larger branches. Make sure you don't touch the ground with the blade.
- Leave enough of the main trunk for leverage to help you wiggle the shrub out.
- If needed, use a cutter mattock to cut through larger roots and pry the shrub out.
- Break up or dig out as much of the remaining root as possible. This is a great time to add compost or other organic soil amendments to the area.
- If the root system is really extensive, you might want to rent a compact utility loader and attach a chain to pull them out (the rubber tracks won't tear up your lawn like a truck's tires).
- If the shrub was diseased, bag and dispose of branches rather than composting.
- If the shrub is healthy, consider listing it on a site like Craigslist or Freecycle. Require the recipient to dig it up, and you'll save yourself all that work!