

# January 2016-Vol.2 No.1



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# Boxwoods: A Virginia Staple

By Cleve Campbell | January 2016-Vol.2 No.1



Boxwoods have fascinated me ever since childhood when I discovered a hiding place inside two 15 foot tall specimens of American boxwood in my grandmother's garden. Since they are emblematic of traditional Virginia yards, you can imagine my distress to discover that the English boxwoods we planted eight years ago were not all thriving like those giants. Here's what my wife and I discovered about these old standbys of landscaping.

**Varieties:** Although hundreds of cultivars exist, three main groups do well with care in central Virginia: Littleleaf (sometimes called Japanese), Common and Korean boxwoods. Thankfully, deer usually avoid them all.

Littleleaf (*Buxus microphylla*) is compact, hardy, heat and pollution tolerant, but may require pruning to keep a perfect shape.

Common (*Buxus sempervirens*) includes the familiar American as well as English boxwood. Because there

are many choices in color and size, choose your cultivar carefully. Note: We dug our English boxwoods from a friend's yard and have had to replace several with hardier varieties.

Korean (*Buxus sinica*. var. *insularis*) also varies from 2-7 feet tall and as much as 10 feet wide, depending on the cultivar and can come with light green foliage.

**Culture:** This is where I needed help. Boxwoods need fertile, well-drained soil regularly amended with organic matter. Because their roots are shallow, soil under the drip line can only be scraped lightly and should be covered with a single inch of aged mulch spread 12 inches beyond the drip line. The best site includes partial sun year round and some protection from harsh winter winds. They will benefit from thinning in the fall (which I had failed to do) to permit better air circulation. Follow pruning by shaking the plant gently to remove dead leaves and then cleaning them up to protect against disease. This is especially true for English boxwoods (*B. sempervirens* 'Suffruticosa') which seem more susceptible to insects and disease. Fresh mulch can be added to keep down grass and weeds.

When a soil test indicates nutrients are needed, broadcast granular fertilizer with a 10-6-4 analysis on top of the mulch just beyond the drip line in the fall. Because roots are shallow, it's important to let the fertilizer dissolve and soak through to the soil. Too much fertilizer will cause browning. A soil test through the Extension Service will indicate if amendments are necessary. Nitrogen deficiency shows up when lower leaves exhibit a uniform yellowing, especially older leaves inside the plant.

Just because their leaves don't wilt, we shouldn't forget that boxwoods can suffer from summer drought and winter winds so water as needed. You can protect plants from especially severe winters and heavy snowfall by wrapping them in burlap.

**Thinning, pruning and shearing:** We often choose boxwoods for landscaping for a couple of very good reasons: they keep their color and can be shaped nicely either by selecting the right cultivar or by shearing. However, bear in mind these hints. Early winter is the time for major pruning to reduce size. Severe reductions in size should be spread over two years. Reach inside the shrub about 6-8 inches down with sharp bypass pruners and cut back to a major joint. Remove about 10 percent of the outer branches. English boxwoods tend to grow especially dense and thus are susceptible to disease, so thinning to promote air circulation is important. In early June, we can shear plants to the shape desired. Since this shaping does not promote the best growth, the plant can then be pruned lightly, taking off only 1-2" branches to encourage more light and air. Again, shake and rake because litter accumulation leads to adventitious roots which can be damaged by excessive heat and cold.

Despite their hardiness, boxwoods do get diseases and pests. The best defense is good cultural practices and quick identification of problems with help from Virginia Cooperative Extension. Boxwood blight has been identified not far from Piedmont Virginia. Insure that new plants come disease-free from reputable dealers.

References:

"Selecting Landscape Plants: Boxwoods" Va. Coop.Ext., [ext.vt.edu/426/426-603](http://ext.vt.edu/426/426-603)

*The Boxwood Handbook* (Lynn R. Batdorf)

"Thin Boxwoods for Improved Plant Health," U.S. National Arboretum website, <http://www.usna.usda.gov/Gardens/faqs/BoxwoodThinning.html>

"About Boxwood," [boxwoodsociety.org](http://boxwoodsociety.org)

“Best Management Practices for Boxwood Blight in the Virginia Home Landscape,”  
Va.Coop.Ext. [pubs.ext.vt.edu/PPWS-29/pdf](https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/PPWS-29/pdf)

# Begoniaceae - A Genus Worth Exploring

By Patsy Chadwick | January 2016-Vol.2 No.1



I recall the day I became bewitched. It was a clear, sunny day some years ago at Longwood Gardens near Philadelphia. I was there at the invitation of a dear friend and fellow plant geek who lives nearby. As avid gardeners, we deeply appreciated our tour of Longwood and wandered through the gardens amiably discussing the merits of each plant we encountered. We were near the end of our tour when we came upon a strange plant that stood apart on a pedestal in the conservatory. Fascinated, we approached the plant tentatively, not sure what we were seeing. Its graceful, mounded shape draped demurely over the edge of the urn. The foliage shimmered ever so slightly in the light. Each leaf curled in on itself in sensual whorls of silvery green bands, alternating with deeper hues of forest green. Everything about this plant seemed exotic, yet oddly familiar. I was hooked. I had to know more about this plant. We searched for the plant identification tag. It read *Begoniaceae*. I had been bewitched - by a begonia!

Begonias are generally regarded as common, ordinary, old-fashioned house plants. But that perception needs to change. There's a vast world of begonias beyond the ones our grandmothers grew. My visit to Longwood Gardens that fateful day opened my eyes to the complex world of this large and diverse genus of plants. While many begonias bloom in glimmering shades of red, pink, white and more, in many cases the foliage is more interesting than the flowers. Any number of cultivars are available with leaves that are smooth, hairy,

spotted, multi-hued, whorled, round, asymmetrical, and even star-shaped. Of the more than 1,000 members of this genus (not counting the vast numbers of named and unnamed cultivars), the majority of them have one thing in common as shown in the photos below: asymmetrical leaf shapes.



Tiger Star Begonia



Iron Cross Begonia



Begonia - Unnamed Cultivar

## DESCRIPTION

Begonias originally came from the tropical and subtropical moist climates of South and Central America, Africa, and southern Asia. The plants are monoecious. In other words, male and female flowers occur separately on the same plant. The male contains numerous stamens. The female has a large inferior ovary and two to four branched or twisted stigmas. These tropical perennials are generally treated as house plants. A few exceptions include wax-type begonias which are widely used as annual bedding plants in summer gardens, and a hardy variety, which can survive winters as cold as those experienced in Zone 6.

## CLASSES OF BEGONIAS

Begonias are grouped within a complicated classification system that is based on flowers, method of propagation and foliage. Root structures are another important way to identify species and may be described as fibrous-rooted, rhizomatous, and tuberous. The American Begonia Society divides the *Begoniaceae* genus into the following eight classes:

**Cane-like:** This is one of the more popular classes of begonia. Members of this class typically have fibrous root structures, an upright habit, and segmented stems that are similar in appearance to bamboo. The old-fashioned angel wing begonias fall into this class. Their name comes from the asymmetrical shape of their leaves, which are dark green with silver spots. Dragon wing begonias are a modern-day hybridized version of the angel wing type. This more compact form has taken the gardening world by storm over the past few years. It has arching branches about 2 feet long, leaves that are shaped like their angel wing relatives but without the silver spots, and masses of drop-dead gorgeous red, pink or white blossoms. This plant is suitable as a lone specimen or as a mass planting in a shady to partly shady spot.

**Semperflorens:** This second fibrous-rooted class includes annual or “wax” begonias, which are grown as bedding plants and sold by the millions in garden centers everywhere. Wax begonias get their name from the waxy appearance of their leaves. They grow quickly, look great when planted in masses or in container combinations, are deer resistant, and will thrive in either sun (except intense, hot afternoon sun) or shade.

The cultivars with bronze-colored leaves work better in sunny locations whereas the cultivars with green leaves do better with afternoon shade.

**Shrub-like:** This third fibrous-rooted class grows upright on branching stems and can range in size from miniatures to giants up to 12 feet tall in more temperate climates. They get their name from their multi-stemmed habit. Rather than just a few stems, they produce a number of stems from the ground and branch freely, giving the appearance of a shrub. While this class of begonia has flowers, it is mainly grown for its foliage.

**Rhizomatous:** The rhizomatous family is the largest of the begonia classes and includes more than 700 species. They are distinguished by their thick stems or rhizomes which grow horizontally near the surface of the soil. New roots and leaves sprout from these stems. This class is valued for its interesting leaves, compact growth, and massive flower displays in spring. *B. erythrophylla*, which is shown in the accompanying photograph, is an early hybrid called 'Beef Steak' because of its large round leaves. This plant's striking foliage is dark, glossy green on top and burgundy on the bottom. When the light strikes the leaves, the combination of the two colors is sensational.



**Rex cultorum:** Just as its name suggests, this class is the “king” of the begonia world. Technically, Rex begonias are rhizomatous but they are classified separately because of their boldly colored foliage and more exacting growing requirements. In fact, they are often grown specifically because of their spectacular foliage. The brilliant colors, shapes, and forms are far more interesting than their blossoms, which tend to be pale and insignificant. Several hundred named Rex cultivars are available these days in addition to numerous unnamed hybrids, including some miniature versions with a mounding form.

**Tuberous:** This class is grown for its exquisite blossoms, which are huge and vaguely reminiscent of Camellia blossoms. In contrast to the other begonia classes, tuberous begonia foliage is fairly ordinary, but the blossoms are clearly some of the most beautiful of the entire species. The blossoms are frequently double or frilly looking and are available in a wide range of rich-looking saturated colors. Some cultivars have picoté blossoms (edged in a color that contrasts with the primary color). Tuberous begonias go dormant in the winter. The fleshy, round tuberous root must be dug up in the fall and stored in a cool dry place over the winter. In spring, it may be replanted either in a pot or directly in the ground after all danger of frost has passed.

*Begonia grandis*, or hardy begonia, is another member of the tuberous class and hails from China. This form of begonia is unique in that it is hardy in gardening zones 6 - 9. This tough plant is slow to emerge in spring, but it quickly forms a ground cover as the summer heat arrives. It produces clusters of pink blossoms from midsummer to early autumn. The characteristic asymmetrical leaves are medium green with burgundy on the undersides. Hardy begonia is a good choice to plant in part or full shade as a mass planting, or as a companion to other shade-loving plants such as ferns or hosta. It's also a good choice for planting under walnut trees, where not much else will thrive.

**Trailing-Scandent:** Compared to the other classes of begonia, this one is fairly small. The name is taken from its growth habit. “Trailing” means that the stems can extend downward toward the ground. “Scandent” means that the branches can be trained to climb, similar to a vine. For the gardener who loves hanging baskets of flowers, this begonia is for you. The trailing habit, glossy leaves, and showy display of white or pink flowers in the spring can be quite beautiful. The only down side to this class is that the pendulous stems are fragile and can be easily broken if you need to re-pot the plant. To help solve the problem, the stems should be pinched back to encourage branching.

**Thick Stemmed:** This is a class of begonia not commonly found commercially but should you encounter it, you’ll know it by its very thick stems with no discernible joints or nodes. This class of begonia sends up new growth from the base of the plant. As the stems lengthen, the lower leaves drop off leaving leaves on the tips of each stem and leaving the stems bare. The plant itself can grow quite large, reaching five to six feet in height. This is an unusual class of begonia that is difficult to grow and may best be enjoyed by the gardener who likes a challenge.

## CARE AND MAINTENANCE

Begonias are generally quite easy to grow provided their cultural requirements for light, water, and humidity are met.

**Light:** If you’re growing begonias as house plants, locate them near a window with bright filtered (indirect) light. As a general rule of thumb, blooming types of begonias prefer more sun than the foliage types. Move them outside during the summer months, but protect them from the hot afternoon sun. They like morning sun but need afternoon shade. Wax begonias that are used as bedding plants are better able to tolerate bright sun than other classes of begonia. The cultivars that have bronze-colored foliage are more sun-tolerant than the ones with green foliage. Tuberous begonias are happier with more shade, preferring less heat than some of the other varieties.

**Soil:** The important thing to remember is that the soil must drain well. For bedding plants, work in some compost to improve the drainage. Use a light texture potting soil for containerized begonias.

**Water:** Both containerized begonias and those used in summer beds like to be kept evenly moist, but begonias absolutely do not like wet feet. Allow the soil to become almost dry between waterings. Overwatering can cause the plant to drop its leaves or cause root rot.

**Fertilizer:** Begonias benefit from a light feeding about once a month during the growing season. Use a balanced organic fertilizer and apply at quarter strength every two weeks or apply a controlled-release fertilizer every three months. Taper off on the fertilizer in fall and withhold it altogether during the winter months.

**Temperature:** Other than the one hardy variety (*Begonia grandis*), begonias do not tolerate cool temperatures. Move your containerized begonias indoors once night-time temperatures drop into the 50s F. Begonias prefer temperatures between 65° and 73° F.

**Humidity:** Most begonias thrive in a humid environment. If the air isn’t humid enough, the edges of the leaves may become crisp. To increase humidity levels, place the potted plant on top of gravel in a pebble tray. *Rex cultorum* begonias are particularly finicky about humidity levels, requiring more humidity than the other classes of begonia. They appreciate being planted in a porous planting mix and misted often with room temperature water.

**Deadheading:** Most begonias benefit from deadheading to keep the plants looking neat. Otherwise, the

spent blossoms have a tendency to fall off and make a mess. Wax begonias (members of the *Begonia semperflorens* class), in particular, benefit from being deadheaded to help keep the floral show going.

**Pinching:** Most begonias do not need to be pruned back or pinched to make them fuller. Cane-like begonias are the exception. If allowed to grow unchecked, they can become leggy and sparse looking. To keep them looking lush and full, pinch the growing tip of each stem at the point where the next leaf will come out.

**Potting:** Plant begonias in pots that are just a little larger than the root ball. Begonias generally prefer to be a little pot-bound. If you grow the large cane-type begonia, pot them in a heavy pot that will not tip over when the plant grows top heavy. Transfer it into a larger pot when the plant needs to be watered very frequently.

**Pests and Diseases:** Begonias generally tend to be pest and disease free. They may occasionally be bothered by mealy bugs or aphids, and mildew may result from damp overnight conditions and poor air circulation.

## PROPAGATION

Begonias are very easy to propagate. Ones with rhizomatous root structures may be propagated from stem or leaf cuttings. I've even rooted a few in a glass of water. Begonias with fibrous roots may be divided. For more detailed information on propagation methods, see the link below for Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-002, "Propagation by Cuttings, Layering and Division."

## SUMMARY

Whether you are new to gardening or are a serious plant collector, you will enjoy growing begonias. Just don't limit yourself to the commonly-grown types. Seek out some of the more exotic varieties. Most garden centers carry a broader range of begonias these days. A small, inexpensive plant can rapidly grow into a large, dramatic specimen in no time at all. The foliage and flowers are colorful and the diversity within this large family of plants is fascinating. Check them out and don't be surprised if you, too, become bewitched by begonias.

## SOURCES

*A-Z Encyclopedia of Garden Plants* (American Horticulture Society, 2008)

"Propagation by Cuttings, Layering, and Division," VCE 426-002.  
([https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-002/426-002\\_pdf.pdf](https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-002/426-002_pdf.pdf)).

American Begonia Society website (<http://www.begonias.org>) (Not to be confused with the National Begonia Society, which is located in the U.K.)

Longwood Gardens website (<https://plantexplorer.longwoodgardens.org/ecmweb/FindPlant.html>)

# The Ornamental Garden in January

By Patsy Chadwick | January 2016-Vol.2 No.1

It's January, the dead of winter, and the avid — or should I say rabid — gardeners among us are suffering from gardening withdrawal. It may be too cold and miserable to work outside, but there is much that can be done from the comfort of your home. So start a fire in the fireplace, put on your warmest sweater and bunny slippers, and begin by pouring through all those plant and seed catalogs that have been piling up since November.

- **DREAM.** This is the best time of year to daydream about this coming spring's ornamental garden. If you're like me, you probably have a list of favorite plants that you grow year in and year out. But once in a while, it's fun to try something new. So, go wild and crazy! If you dream of something variegated, then cushion spurge (*Euphorbia martinii* 'Ascot Rainbow') or red twig dogwood (*Cornus alba* 'Elegantissima') might be just the ticket. Do you yearn to try something outlandishly orange? If so, then butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) or California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*) might appeal to you. How about growing a plant with burgundy or purple foliage? Smoketree (*Cotinus coggygria*) or the fall foliage of oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) might make your heart sing. Or how about growing something more exotic or tropical, such as elephant ears (*Colocasia*) or a dwarf Cavendish banana tree?
- **LIST all the plants you've secretly thought about growing** but didn't have the nerve to try. Be daring and experiment with something a little different!
- **ORDER early from plant catalogs.** While supplies are plentiful, order flower seeds and any other supplies you need, so that you will be well prepared when it's time to start seedlings. Make sure you've got enough cell packs, transplant pots, soil-less potting mix, heat mats, fertilizer, etc. If you have a grow-light setup, check the lightbulbs to make sure they work.
- **SORT through all those plant tags** you've accumulated over the years. If you have no need for the tags, get rid of them. Personally, I like to keep mine (probably because of the packrat gene I inherited). Organize them in whatever system makes sense to you. For example, arrange them alphabetically by plant name or sort them by type (perennial, annual, shrub, tree, vine, bulb, etc.).
- **CREATE a master list of gardening tasks for each month of the year**, using the tasks and tips provided in previous issues of this newsletter to help you. Include such tasks as planting, pruning, dividing, fertilizing, weeding, treating for pests, pinching, and deadheading. This will help keep you focused and perhaps save you a lot of time later.
- **CREATE permanent labels for your ornamental plants.** How often have you accidentally dug up or damaged spring-blooming bulbs because you didn't know they were there? By preparing labels for them now, they will be ready to install as your plants emerge from the soil in the spring time.
- **LEARN a few basic botanical terms.**
  - Take some of the mystery out of **plant identification information** on plant tags. For example, growth habits are often described using the terms listed below:
    - Gracilis — slender or graceful
    - Globosa — round or globe shaped
    - Pyramidalis — pyramid shaped
    - Fastigiata or columnaris — upright or columnar shaped
    - Nana or pumila — a dwarf plant
    - Repens — a creeping plant

- Prostrata or procumbens — a plant that grows flat to the ground
- Scandens — a climbing plant
- With the growing emphasis on planting **native species**, this sample list of botanical terms, signifying plant origins, may help you determine whether a plant is native or non-native:
  - Americana or Americanus - of or from the Americas (both North and South)
  - Anglica - of or from England
  - Australis - of or from the Southern Hemisphere (but not necessarily from Australia)
  - Borealis - of or from the Northern Hemisphere
  - Canadensis - of or from Canada or North-eastern North America
  - Carolinianus - of or from North or South Carolina
  - Chinensis or sinensis - of or from China
  - Japonica - of or from Japan
  - Mexicana - of or from Mexico
  - Occidentalis - Western (especially North American)
  - Siberica - of or from Siberia
  - Virginiana or Virginianus - of or from Virginia (United States)
- **INSPECT:**
  - **Overwintering tender bulbs** to make sure they are still plump and free of mold. If they're looking a bit shriveled, spray them with just enough water to barely moisten them.
  - **Houseplants** for pests, such as white flies, scale, spider mites, mealybugs or fungus gnats.
  - **Gardening tools.** Clean, sharpen, and oil your shovels, hoes, pruners, saws, loppers, hedge trimmers, wheelbarrows, lawn mowers, and any other gardening equipment or tools you own. Order any tools you want to add to your inventory or to replace any that are beyond repair.

Finally, if you're really desperate to do a gardening-related project, **create a plant inventory database.** This is particularly useful if you have an extensive collection of plants. A database is a good way to keep track of their location, characteristics, cultural needs, and any special information regarding their care and maintenance. A gardening journal can be used for this purpose. Or, if you're comfortable using computer spreadsheets, this is an even better method for entering information such as the plant's botanical name, common name, cultivar or variety, height, width, bloom time, cultural requirements (sunlight and water), deer resistance, drought tolerance, etc.

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# Going Native

By Susan Hall | January 2016-Vol.2 No.1



There is an exciting new trend in gardening; native plants are making a comeback! More and more of us are using and loving native plants in our gardens. This is good since these plants are beautiful and usually less fussy than introduced species. It is also very good for the environment. Native plants supply food for our native birds, many of whose populations are in steep decline. Using native plants also avoids the risk of introducing a foreign species which might turn out to be a destructive invasive.

The first modern champion of native plants that I remember is Lady Bird Johnson, wife of President Lyndon Johnson. I think many of us who were around at that time were more focused on policy issues like the Great Society and the Vietnam War. I remember thinking that Mrs. Johnson's campaign to encourage the use of native wildflowers seemed trite and superficial. Well, score one for Ladybird. She also had the insight to call billboards "litter on a stick".

If you have some time this winter while the ground is frozen, or just really muddy, pick up a copy of Douglas Tallamy's book *Bringing Nature Home*. Mr. Tallamy covers all the scientific arguments for including natives in your garden without sounding pedantic. His tone is impassioned and inspiring; his plea for gardeners to take steps to save the natural world is difficult to ignore. He also includes practical

information; for example, did you know that if you want to attract luna moths to your garden, you should plant alders, American beech, hickories, oaks, persimmon, sweetgum, and willows?

So consider adding a few natives to your gardening plans for 2016. This column will be a regular feature in "The Garden Shed" and we hope it will help you find, plant, and enjoy natives in your garden.

# Stone Soup

By Cate Whittington | January 2016-Vol.2 No.1



Are you familiar with the folktale called Stone Soup? Hungry travelers arrive in a village and its inhabitants refuse to feed them. Rather than leave the village, the travelers place a stone in the bottom of an empty pot, fill the pot with water from a nearby stream, and set it over an open fire. Arousing the curiosity of the stingy

villagers, the travelers answer their queries by telling them that they are making stone soup. “But,” the travelers say, “It is not quite ready. It needs a few more carrots (leeks, potatoes, seasonings, etc.).” And so, one by one, the villagers add vegetables and seasonings to the pot. By story’s end, the travelers and villagers sit down to enjoy a delicious meal together, prepared in the same cooperative spirit as today’s popular potluck suppers.

In her book, *Nourishing Broth*, Sally Fallon Morell tells us that the first soups, dating back to the Stone Age, were called “stone soups.” Why? Because “...hot stones from nearby fires were added to the abdominal pouches of butchered animals in order to simmer up mixtures of meat, fat, bones, herbs, wild grains, and water.”

Winter is the perfect season to keep soup simmering on the back burner. And Sally Morell’s book is the perfect book to have handy when preparing nourishing broths. I highly recommend it for its wealth of knowledge on the science and healing power of broth, and for its simple recipes for preparing these broths in a slow cooker. Your home will smell marvelous throughout the long winter days.

The following recipe relies on stock from dried shitake mushrooms, but could just as easily be made with chicken, veggie, or hearty meat broths. It is made in the traditional manner of most soups, beginning with sautéed onion and garlic. The suggested vegetables—calcium-rich greens and legumes—help boost the immune system. I have also added butternut squash, tomatoes, and apples with great success. Remember, this is Stone Soup—so, toss in the leftovers and eat with abandon.

### *Ingredients*

4 dried shitake mushrooms

6 cups water

2 Tablespoons olive oil

1 large onion, diced

2 garlic cloves, minced

1 Tablespoon fresh ginger, grated

1 leek, diced

3 carrots, diced

1 can cannellini beans, drained

4 cups chopped kale or collard greens (or combination of the two)

Salt, pepper, rosemary, thyme, splash of cider vinegar or lemon juice

### *Directions (Serves 6)*

1. Cover dried mushrooms with 6 cups water in medium pot. Bring to boil, reduce heat, and

- simmer for 15 minutes. Remove from heat and set aside.
2. When mushrooms are soft, remove them from the broth. Dice the stems and caps and place them back in the pot with the broth.
  3. In a larger pot, over medium heat, sauté the onion, garlic, and ginger in olive oil for about 3 minutes.
  4. Add the leeks, carrots, and cannellini beans, and sauté another 3 minutes.
  5. Add the kale and/or collards, and sauté until greens are deep green and tender.
  6. Add the mushrooms and broth to the sautéed vegetables and simmer slowly for about 20 minutes.
  7. Add seasonings to taste.
  8. If desired, serve over brown rice or soba noodles.

Resources:

*Nourishing Broth* (Fallon, Sally Morell and Kaayla T. Daniel, 2014)