



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

CLUMPING BAMBOOS

A By Laurie Meyerpeter, Placer County Master Gardener

Q I want to plant bamboo but my spouse is afraid that it will take over. Are there bamboos that are less invasive than others?

A Nitpickers would say that the technical term is not “invasive” but “aggressive” but the terminology is not important if your favorite neighbor comes over with complaints that bamboo shoots are coming up under her clothesline. However, not all bamboos are aggressive. Clumping bamboos grow in neat circles and will not invade surrounding areas. Their growth habit is similar to other large shrubs of similar size.

The downside to clumping bamboos is that they are not reliably hardy in sites where temperatures drop below 20 degrees. There are a few clumping bamboos that are hardy in colder areas but these are often native to the Himalayas and while frost resistant, they are sensitive to our hot summer temperatures.

Another down side is that clumping bamboos don't readily grow into long rows but grow in a circular habit, making them difficult to use as a long barrier or screen. Also, bamboo is more expensive than other plants. And although mature bamboo grows very fast, it does take a few years for a plant to develop sufficient underground growth to produce that famous fast growth above ground.

However, for most gardeners, clumping bamboo makes a wonderful specimen plant that is easy to grow, easy to maintain, and stunningly beautiful. Favorites include Oldham's Timber Bamboo, a large variety with huge stalks; Alphonse Karr, a medium variety with variegated stalks; Buddha's Belly, a variety that can grow quite large but when stressed grows interesting bulbous shaped stalks; and Golden Goddess, a variety with thin stalks and more feathery appearance. Chusquea cueou, a variety from the Andes, is hardier than other clumpers, and might be a possibility for interested gardeners in colder areas of the foothills.

Many nurseries stock bamboo, but it is good to call around. Prices and selection can differ dramatically from nursery to nursery. Because it is frost sensitive, avoid planting in late fall or winter. Choose the planting site carefully as most bamboos are large plants with shallow but extensive interwoven root systems, and like all large shrubs, the plant will be difficult to move at a later time. Water and fertilize regularly, especially for the first few years until the plant is established. And be patient, it does take a several years for bamboo to establish itself. Then sit back and enjoy. There are few plants as fun as bamboo!

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