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# “MASTER GARDENER MYTH BUSTERS”—TAKES ON BAMBOO

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From *The Curious Gardener*, Spring 2010

Bamboo. “It’s invasive.” “It will go crazy and take over your backyard.” “You’ll never get rid of it.” Bamboo has a reputation as the bad boy of the plant world. *How much of this is true?*

Bamboo is the subject of numerous plant myths, most of them false or half truths. Lucky bamboo is NOT a bamboo. It’s a houseplant in the Draceana family.

Heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica*) is NOT a bamboo. It’s a shrub that looks vaguely like bamboo but it’s not related. The “bamboo” that grows along river bottoms is also NOT a bamboo. Like bamboo, it’s in the grass family, but that plant is *Arundo donax*, or Giant Reed and is extremely invasive.

Another myth is that bamboo makes a fast, cheap screen. It is fast once mature but that takes several years. And bamboo is not an inexpensive plant. If an immediate screen is desired, shrubs like wax leaf privet are more likely to make a fast, cheap screen than bamboo.

Bamboo is technically not “invasive.” Instead, many running bamboos are considered “aggressive” and, without containment, may send up shoots in your neighbor’s yard. But it won’t randomly sprout in a field a half mile away because it primarily spreads close to the “mother plant” through underground rhizomes and doesn’t produce annual seeds. Furthermore, there are clumping bamboos that are neither invasive nor aggressive!

Bamboo is a really big grass with thousands of varieties. It’s an amazing plant. Once mature, a stalk can grow several feet a day. Typically, a shoot may grow over 1’ a day in this area. The stalks emerge from the ground in a conical shape, and the diameter of that cone is the diameter that the stalk will be. It grows to its full height in a few weeks, and after that it will never grow taller or wider in diameter. Bamboo stalks are strong and can be used in the garden for stakes, building materials, crafts, etc. The young shoots are edible in many varieties. The leaves of some varieties are used like grape leaves to wrap foods. It’s a great specimen plant for the garden.

To understand bamboo, a gardener should visualize bamboo as a very large plant, like a redwood tree. Most of the mass of the plant is underground. The tall stately stalks (called culms) are like the leaves and twigs of a redwood. The “trunk” and “branches” are growing underground. Understanding bamboo means recognizing that it is a big plant, even if most of the plant is underground.

The best bamboo for most yards is a “clumping” bamboo. Clumping bamboo is a well behaved garden plant that expands a few inches each year in a tidy circular “clumping” pattern. It doesn’t need containment or an underground barrier.

There are many varieties, from mid-size to large. Its only drawback is that many clumping bamboos may freeze at high elevations. Most varieties are hardy down into the teens and low twenties when mature. There are varieties that are hardy at very cold temperatures but these tend to be sensitive to heat so should be planted in cooler areas of the garden.

“Running” bamboos have rhizomes that spread underground for great distances. The large varieties can pop up as far away as 20’! Large running bamboos should absolutely not be planted in small yards unless grown in a

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container. However, there is a far greater selection of running bamboos available than clumping bamboos and if gardeners with large gardens or acreage insist on growing a running variety, it is essential to install an underground barrier made for bamboo to a depth of 2 1/2 ft below the surface. A special plastic product is made for this purpose. Detailed information is available from the *American Bamboo Society*. In some instances, and for some varieties, there may be other effective methods of containment and gardeners might want to consult with a bamboo specialist for additional information.

All bamboo is easy to care for. It's a big grass and needs regular, deep watering and a fertilizer for grasses (but not a "weed and feed" product) applied during the warm months or as directed on the label. Organic fertilizers, compost, and aged manures also work well. If stalks die, remove with loppers or a saw. Pests are rarely a problem in this area.

Many people have questions on removing bamboo and find that it is easier to remove an entire grove of bamboo than a section of it. The best way to remove a large grove of bamboo is to hire professional help to physically remove the root mass. (Killing the top growth usually isn't effective, and if it is successful, the thick root mass will still need to be removed in order to replant.) After removing the bamboo root mass, fill the hole with planting soil. Destroy all young bamboo sprouts immediately as they emerge.

Controlling half a bamboo grove is much harder. Removing half the bamboo grove leaves the underground "mother plant." It's like cutting some leaves and twigs off only one side of a redwood tree. If a gardener needs to remove half of a bamboo grove (for example if a neighbor's bamboo has spread beyond the fence line), dig a 2 1/2 foot deep trench along the fence line, cutting and removing any bamboo rhizomes. Dig out all of the unwanted bamboo roots and rhizomes in your side of the yard. Fill the holes. Diligently destroy any young bamboo that re-sprout.

Most bamboo is NOT a problem and is a source of great pleasure in the garden. Planting the correct variety (and installing an underground barrier if planting running varieties) will ensure that bamboo is a joy instead of a headache.

#### **Further information**

American Bamboo Society [http:// www.americanbamboo.org/](http://www.americanbamboo.org/)

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