

Bamboo

It may come as a surprise to some people that there are grasses that grow as tall as buildings, and have stems up to 1 foot in diameter. These are the bamboos, and they are members of the grass family GRAMINEAE, subfamily BAMBUSACEAE, which comprises about 90 genera and 1000 species. They range in size from the tiny species of *Sasa* to the giant subtropical *Phyllostachys bambusoides* that grows up to 90 feet tall with a diameter of 12 inches.

These grasses are native to many parts of the world, including the United States. When we think of bamboo, we most likely think of those areas of the world where they are very abundant such as Southeast Asia, China, and Japan.

In the Orient, these plants are used for a variety of purposes, such as building, musical instruments and many articles of decorative and domestic use. Marco Polo recorded in his journal that since at least 200 B.C. the Chinese used bamboo as casings for oil wells to depths of up to 3500 feet.

In the United States and Europe, bamboo canes have long been used for fine fishing poles and for plant supports. They are also used for furniture, screens, curtains, fencing, and some of the giant varieties are even used for flooring. Because it contains silicic acid, which can absorb poison in the stomach, bamboo is used in medicine. As a source for paper pulp, bamboos are important. *Phyllostachys pubescens* is used in China and in Japan and *Bambusa vulgaris* in trials in the western hemisphere.

In many areas, bamboo is grown as a food source. The shoots of 'Moso' (*P. heterocycla* f. *pubescens*) are considered to be the finest of all. Other varieties prized for their shoots are *Phyllostachys pubescens* and *P. viridis*. While bamboo contains cyanogens that may kill cattle, they pose no threat to humans because they are consumed as a cooked vegetable.

Bamboo grows from rhizomes and fibrous roots. The rhizomes are varied according to species – some are short, thick and somewhat like tubers, while others are long and slender. The more tuberous ones grow in compact masses that spread very slowly; the long slender ones often range widely and spread rapidly.

Jointed hollow stems rise from the rhizomes. These stems, or canes, are most commonly erect or arching, although some of the lesser-known varieties are vines. Branches develop from the joints of the stems, on alternating sides. The leaves are attached by a short leafstalk to a sheath that surrounds the stem. The leaves are usually pointed linear. Nearly all of the bamboos are evergreen, but the leaves are not long-lived. New leaves develop at the ends of the branchlets before the old ones fall.

The flowering habits of bamboos are also diverse. A few bloom annually, but many do not bloom at all. With some varieties, when they do bloom, the plants may be seriously weakened. Seed production is rare – propagation is done by division.

Although we think of bamboo as tropical, several varieties are hardy enough to live outdoors in sheltered locations in northern regions. They are well adapted for use in containers. When planted in the garden, the less rampant kinds are excellent as single specimen clumps. Or they may be set among, but should not be crowded against, evergreen shrubs such as camellias, rhododendrons, and azaleas. They look great planted by ponds or streams. Some of the smaller varieties make excellent groundcovers, while the taller species provide screening.

Soil for bamboos should be deep, rich and moist, but they do not prosper in waterlogged earth. The depth of the soil should be a minimum of 1 foot, and deeper is better. If the soil is clay, sand or other non-organic matter should be added to improve porosity. Compost can be added on top. If planting around ponds or streams, the soil should be 1 foot or more above the surface of the water.

Planting is best done in the first half of the year, or the beginning of the season of active growth (Spring). The plants should be planted as deep, or very slightly deeper, than they were previously. It is important to spread the roots evenly, to sift soil evenly among the rhizomes so that there are no air pockets. As soon as planting is finished, the area should be thoroughly watered and mulched with a 3-inch layer of compost, peat moss, wood chips, or other suitable organic matter.

If you are planting divisions of older clumps, it is advisable to cut back the old canes to within 2 to 4 feet of the ground. This will reduce the danger of loss of moisture by transpiration. When small clump divisions are made, they should be of one- and two-year-old canes attached to young shoots. Older material gives less satisfactory results. Great care should be taken during the first season of these newly set out plants so that they do not suffer for lack of water. If you plant in a container, again you will want to take care that there is sufficient water.

Bamboos are not troubled by diseases in the cooler climates. In warmer areas you may find fungal and bacterial leaf spots, and occasionally rust. Fungicides will normally take care of the problem. Insects that may attack your plants are aphids, red spider mites and scale.

References

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