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“How-To” Guide

Growing

Bamboo

USES:

Mention “Bamboo” and you will get a varying array of responses. Anyone who has ever had to dig out unwanted Bamboo will scowl and cuss at the very mention of it. Yet, anyone who has ever had the opportunity to spend time in a Bamboo garden will fondly recall the sheer beauty and tranquility that it has to offer. Bamboo is a remarkable resource that, when used properly, offers many possibilities in the home garden. Need a quick screen? Want to create a windbreak? Like to add subtle noise to your garden? Have a hill that has erosion problems? Need some shoots to harvest for your next stir-fry? Bamboo provides solutions to all of these scenarios.

There are many myths to Bamboo that, unfortunately, lead to its bad reputation. A truly beautiful plant that is tough, resilient and easy to care for, Bamboo deserves to be used more in the home landscape. There are over 1200 species of Bamboo throughout the world, ranging from small, grass-like ground covers to 90-foot tall timbers so there is certain to be one to suit your needs. This guide will take you through the care and culture of successfully growing Bamboo in your landscape and, hopefully, aid in putting some of these myths to rest.

TERMS:

Before delving into Bamboo care and culture there are a few terms related to Bamboo that one should be familiar with:

- Culm:** This is the “stalk” of the Bamboo. Usually hollow, except at the nodes, culms do not thicken but emerge from the ground at their final girth.
- Node:** The solid, swelling ring on the culm where branches originate.
- Internode:** The area of the culm between nodes.
- Sulcus:** A pronounced groove throughout the length of an internode caused by the presence of a developing branch bud at the base of the internode, grooving the culm as it elongates.
- Branch:** Emerging from the nodes on alternate sides, branches are usually formed from a single bud.
- Sheath:** The protective wrapping around newly forming culms. They provide structural rigidity and protect against impact, disease and pest attack.
- Shoot:** The new, leafless culm that emerges from the soil.
- Rhizome:** The underground stems from which new shoots originate.

RUNNING vs. CLUMPING:

There are two primary types of bamboo: running and clumping.

Running bamboo has a very aggressive root system that, if not controlled properly, can become a problem. It spreads rapidly through the soil sending up shoots at varying distances away from the parent plant. It is this type of Bamboo for which the bad reputation exists. Running Bamboo should always be planted within a barrier (see *CONTROLLING SPREAD* below).

Clumping bamboo does not send out the long runners, instead sending up shoots in a fairly compact manner. Be advised, though, that clumping Bamboo is still very strong and will continue to expand its clump in all directions, so for this reason should not be planted alongside a fence as it can eventually push the fence over.

CONTROLLING SPREAD:

The ability of Bamboo to spread rapidly has, unfortunately, led to a bad reputation for the plant. Running types of bamboo should always be planted with a root barrier installed. The barrier is made of a high density black plastic 2' in depth and is inserted into the ground around the desired perimeter of the Bamboo grove, overlapping a few feet at the seam. It is advisable to keep the overlap portion at a spot where it can be easily monitored in the event a rhizome should escape. When installing the barrier it should be left 2" above the soil level and should tilt outward slightly so that any rhizomes colliding with the barrier will be directed upward. Each spring the barrier should be examined to ensure no rhizome has escaped. In the rare event a rhizome leaps the barrier it should be cut off or rerouted within the barrier.

SHOOTING:

The true excitement of growing Bamboo is the period when they begin "shooting". Shooting is when the shoots begin to emerge from the ground at full diameter of the new culm. Yes, a mature culm that is 4 inches in diameter will emerge from the ground 4 inches in diameter. The culms then thrust skyward at an astonishing rate - more than 3 ft. in a 24-hour period for some species! The branchless, elongating culms continue skyward until they have reached their mature height, at which point the branching begins. Warm weather and moisture encourage shooting. Running types will do the majority of their shooting in spring and early summer while clumpers start in mid-summer and continue to fall. In both cases shooting could occur at any time if the conditions are right, although late season shoots will remain branches until the following spring.

THINNING:

Thinning is essential for a healthy and attractive Bamboo grove. Thinning is the process of removing culms to allow for sunlight to penetrate the grove and should be performed in late fall or early winter. Once the grove or clump has become fairly dense, start with removing damaged culms and then move on to the older culms, those that are 3-5 years in age. Culms should be cut clean at ground level. In clumping types, culms will need to be removed from the middle of the clump to keep the clump from becoming impacted at their centers and also to remove old growth making way for healthy new growth. It is best to clear clumping types before they become too large to manage.

LIMITING HEIGHT:

Ideally Bamboo should be selected for its specific height and be allowed to grow unlimited. In the instance where height needs to be controlled there are two methods, either by modifying growing conditions or by manual pruning. The amount of water and fertilization that plants receive directly affect their growth. Minimal water and little to no fertilizer will limit growth, especially in poor soils. Height may also be controlled by cutting the tips off of the shoots once they reach the desired height. At this point the shoots will stop growing and push out their branches and leaves.

WATER:

Bamboo can be fairly drought tolerant, but looks its best when given ample water. The soil should be kept moist, but not soggy and should drain well. When using drip irrigation on running types of Bamboo, be aware that heads will also need to be placed away from the original planting to encourage rhizome spread and development.

SOIL & PLANTING:

Although Bamboo will survive under adverse conditions and is not particularly fussy, the best soils promote rapid growth and the most attractive plants. Bamboo prefers fertile soil rich in organic materials. It should be loose and well-drained and slightly acidic. Clay soils should be amended well to improve drainage. A mixture of 1 part *Master Nursery Azalea, Camellia Gardenia Mix* with 1 part *Master Nursery Top Soil Plus* with 1 part native soil will suffice.

When planting a hole should be dug twice as wide and the same depth as the container. Amend your soil as described above and be sure to add the recommended amount of *Master Nursery Master Start* fertilizer. The plants should be planted such that they are slightly above the original soil line and watered thoroughly immediately after planting. Spacing of running types will be determined by how fast the coverage is desired for that particular location. Clumping types should be spaced to allow for their mature height and spread.

FERTILIZING:

According to a 19th-century Bamboo cultivation book it is recommended to use “the dead bodies of sheep, dogs, cats and rats as well as the skins, bones and hoofs of cattle and horses”. It’s a good bet your neighbors may not appreciate this approach so it’s best to stick to the packaged fertilizers of the 21st-century.

Keep in mind the Bamboo is a form of grass. Therefore, to encourage quick growth and spread, feed in early spring as shoots are developing with a good lawn food such as *Master Nursery Master Green Lawn Food* (never use a “weed and feed” type of fertilizer) and continue periodic feedings throughout the growing period. This will provide the nitrogen necessary to promote strong shooting. In the fall switch to *Master Nursery Master Bloom 0-10-10* as fall is when the plant is storing up nutrients for spring. Master Bloom will supply the necessary nutrients to ensure strong root development during this period.

MULCH:

Bamboo benefits greatly from a layer of mulch. Placing a 3-6 inch layer of mulch helps keep the rhizomes warm and moist and protects them from temperature extremes as well as adding much needed organic material back into the soil. Materials used for mulching include bark, pine needles, straw, leaf humus, fully composed manures and, most commonly, the natural leaf drop associated with Bamboo. One caution with mulch, though, is that if it covers the root barrier (see *CONTROLLING SPREAD*) you still must check the barrier each spring for errant rhizomes.

PESTS:

Fortunately there are relatively few pests that attack Bamboo. One of the most common will be aphids in the spring. Although they are not a real threat to the plant, they leave behind a sticky excretion that fosters an unsightly black, sooty mold. Aphids can be controlled a number of ways including releasing ladybugs or spraying with horticultural oils or soaps. Another pest that may occur on occasion are mites. These tiny spiders appear when the weather turns warm and suck the juice from the leaf cells, leaving behind a stippled look to the leaf. Again, they are not a real threat to the plant and can be controlled with a miticide. And, of course, deer, rabbits and squirrels may go after the tasty new shoots as they emerge so repellents will need to be in place during the shooting season.

CONTAINER GROWING:

Bamboo makes for an excellent choice for containers. Because the culms (stalks) are hollow they are actually much lighter in weight than most container grown plants thus making them easy to move. Strategically placed, bamboo in a container can instantly make a much needed privacy screen. They can also play a transitional role providing a temporary screen until a new tree or shrub grows to size, or as a supplemental screen in the winter months when deciduous trees lose their leaves.

When potting bamboo, use a 50-50 mix of *Master Nursery Camellia, Azalea, Gardenia Planting Mix* and *Master Nursery Top Soil Plus*. This will give you a rich, acidic soil but will also provide the drainage bamboo requires. Feed monthly from March thru October with *Master Nursery Formula 49* organic fertilizer to ensure strong shoot growth and to provide essential micronutrients.