



Growing bamboos in the home garden

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Reviewed August 2006

Bamboos are related to the grass family (*Graminaceae*) and include more than 1250 species. They are mainly from the warm-temperate to hot areas of the world (latitudes 39° North to 47° South). Australia has three native bamboo species in the tropical areas of the Northern Territory. In Japan, bamboos are revered for their beauty, elasticity and strength.

Good bamboo varieties can be seen in Western Australia at the Perth Zoo, Whiteman Park, Supreme Court Gardens, at specialised bamboo nurseries and in many private gardens.

Uses

The bamboo has been described as one of the most useful and beautiful plants in the world. With good management, the bamboo is an excellent ornamental plant for landscaping, for use as a windbreak or as a screen plant. It is widely used for many purposes including production of edible shoots, furniture, chipboard, baskets, crafts, wall cladding, weaving, fences, stakes and props.

Bamboo shoots are common in Asian cooking. All bamboo varieties have edible shoots, but species with large and sweet shoots are mainly used for this purpose. These have good supplies of carbohydrates, proteins, minerals and vitamins. They are harvested in spring and summer when they are less than 60 cm tall. The shoots are boiled for 15 to 30 minutes in salty water.

Poles from stems which are about three years old and are more than 5 cm in diameter, have a good retail value for crafts and furniture.

Climate

Bamboos grow well in most areas of Western Australia, and on a wide range of well drained soils. Temperate bamboos and most tropical bamboos will grow in the South West of Western Australia. There are many varieties of both types, especially in the Denmark and Perth areas. The temperate species have excellent tolerance to frost, but many of the tropical species will also tolerate low temperatures and slight frosts. Bamboo plants are hardy and will tolerate cyclones, temporary flooding and short-term droughts. Their stems are not snapped by strong winds.

Soils

Although loamy soils are optimum, bamboos will grow on a wide range of soils provided they are well drained. They grow well on the Perth sandy soils, with good irrigation and fertilising, and where there is good use of organic material to improve the soil. All of the photographs in this garden note were taken of bamboos growing on sandy soils.

However, bamboo plants grow poorly in heavy clays or where there is high salinity or extended water-logging. The optimal soil pH (by the water system of measurement) is between 5 and 6.5. Apply lime if the pH is too acidic (low pH).

Description

Bamboos can be shrubs, or ground covers, or grow to 30 m tall. Bamboo stems can vary from just pencil thickness up to a diameter of 20 to 30 cm.

The underground swollen, woody, rhizome is the foundation of the plant; it produces beautiful arching stems and graceful leaves. Flowering is rare, and plants that flower and set seed soon die.

Several plants are falsely called bamboos. The 'lucky bamboo' (*Dracaena sanderiana*) is a popular indoors pot-plant and the small bushy panda bamboo (*Pogonotherum paniceum*) is a true grass. The sacred bamboo (*Nandina domestica*) is a small garden shrub, with reddish leaves. The giant reed (*Arundo donax*) is a grass, but resembles a bamboo, because it has cane-like stems to 6 m high. Unlike bamboo, it flowers readily at the top of the stems. It is often found in waste areas and chicken-runs, but may be useful for stakes.

Varieties

There are two distinct types of bamboo which are known as clumpers or runners.

The invasive nature of runner bamboos has resulted in a bad name for bamboos generally. Some Local Government authorities are unaware of the two types of bamboos and may state that bamboos cannot be planted in their areas. Clumpers are the main varieties that should be planted in home gardens. However, running types are suitable in home gardens if planted more than 15 m from neighbouring properties, if planted in pots, or if provision is made to keep the runners in a confined space.

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Clumpers

Clumpers produce new shoots close to the old shoots and the plants grow in clumps that can be easily managed. Growth is fast and can be more than 30 cm per day. The stems reach their full height in 40 to 90 days. There are many clumping varieties; some of the best varieties for home gardens are as follows:

- The hedge bamboo (*Bambusa multiplex*), has attractive slender, arching, stems. These grow to 3 to 8 m high and are good for screening and stakes. There are about 10 types and the yellow-stemmed Alphonse-Karr (yellow stem with green stripes) and 'Silverstripe' are especially good ornamental varieties.



Hedge bamboo growing at Perth Zoo.

- Oldham's Sweet Shoot bamboo (*Bambusa oldhamii*) is a tall (to 15 m), but compact, clumping variety with large stems. It is suitable as a windbreak, as a screen plant, for landscaping, for timber, and for harvesting its sweet edible shoots.



Oldham's Sweet Shoot bamboo is suitable as a windbreak, as a screen plant, and for its timber and edible shoots.

- The weavers' bamboo (*Bambusa textilis*) has several types. These produce graceful plants with medium-sized stems that are suitable for weaving, or for stakes.
- Barcode bamboo (*Bambusa vulgaris vittata*) is a tall variety with large golden stems with green stripes and edible, slightly bitter shoots, which are a popular food with Vietnamese people.
- The small Mexican weeping bamboo (*Otatea acuminata acuminata*) has graceful, weeping foliage with narrow leaves and medium-sized stems and grows to 6 m.



Weavers bamboo is a graceful plant.



Barcode bamboo has beautiful stems and is a good screen plant.

- Timor black bamboo (*Bambusa lako*) and Indonesian black bamboo (*Gigantochloa atrovioleacea*), have attractive tall, large, black stems (especially in warmer areas); the Timor variety also has attractive green stripes.
- *Bambusa vulgaris* 'Wamin' and *Bambusa ventricosa* produce swollen stems when stressed and are known as Buddha's Belly varieties.

Shoots of clumping bamboos are harvested when they are 600 mm above the ground, with a sharp, straight blade. The cut is made close to the join of the fibrous rhizome and the soft tender new shoot. *Bambusa oldhamii* is an excellent variety for producing edible shoots and also timber for most home gardens. The *Dendrocalamus* species *asper* and *latiflorus* are also excellent, but should be planted only in large home gardens.



Indonesian black bamboo has beautiful black stems.



Bambusa oldhamii clumper shoots ready for harvesting.



Buddha's Belly clumper with swollen stems, growing in a large pot.

Runners

Runners have long, slender underground stems (rhizomes). They are slow to produce shoots as they send out long rhizomes to colonise the whole of the surrounding soil. These bamboos can form large forests and can be a menace in a garden and for neighbours, as new shoots may emerge up to 10 m from the parent plant.

The *Phyllostachys* genus has many varieties that produce runners, all of which have a notch on their stems. The common black bamboo (*Phyllostachys nigra*) is popular, but has extensive marginal leaf burn in Perth



With good pruning, running types can be controlled with a surrounding trench.

