

Choosing Bamboo for the Garden

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Photography by Robert Noonan

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Once the bane of gardeners, who searched for methods to eradicate what they saw as an invasive nuisance, bamboo has made a recent comeback into people's yards; some would even say this oriental grass has become a hot item. Gardeners are now interested in planting newly introduced varieties, which offer low-maintenance, evergreen plantings that are deer resistant and non-invasive, all desirable attributes. Among bamboo's many benefits, the wonderful sound of the plant's delicate leaves rustling in the wind has got to be at the top of the list. Newly available types of bamboo and old favorites can be used as screens, specimens, groundcovers, container plants, and even food.

Bamboo comes in many different heights. Some are used for groundcovers with heights varying from 1 to 3 feet. Bamboo can also reach 40 feet, which is ideal for privacy screens and shelter for wildlife," says Kurt Bluemel, owner of Kurt Bluemel, Inc., a wholesale nursery in Maryland specializing in bamboo, ornamental grasses, and perennials. "There are also clumping types of bamboo that are not invasive."



Bamboo is actually a highly evolved grass that spreads by rhizomes (underground stems). Every year, new shoots emerge from the underground rhizomes to form the stems, which are called culms. Basically, there are two types of bamboo: the clumpers and the runners. Clumpers stay close to where they are planted, and although most are not cold hardy, *Fargesia* is a relatively new species for northerners to add to their landscape. The runners, which include the commonly seen *Pleioblastus*, *Sasa*, and *Phyllostachys* can take over a garden if not controlled, but they have beneficial uses as well, depending on the site.

One of the exciting new introductions is the clumper *Fargesia*. Because it is not invasive, *Fargesia* can be planted as a specimen, screen, or even container plant. It has pencil-thin culms and 2- to 3-inch, bamboo-like leaves (not all bamboo plants have the slender leaves we typically associate with bamboo). "*Fargesia* is a beautiful specimen in the small garden. You don't have to worry about it, and it is a nice, graceful evergreen," says Monika Burwell. Burwell, Bluemel's sister, is a landscape designer and owner of Earthly Pursuits, the retail side of Bluemel's wholesale nursery business. "*Fargesia* is deer resistant, disease free, and low maintenance."

There are several types available: *F. rufa* 'Green Panda' grows 6 to 8 feet tall and maintains a bushy shape. 'Green Panda' is one of the earliest ones to produce new shoots in the spring. As the shoots grow, the new sheaths on the culms are shrimp pink, then drop to reveal green culms. *F. nitida* 'Great Wall' reaches 18 feet at maturity, with shoots emerging in late summer. Its new culms are blue/white and powdery but eventually turn green. The culms remain branchless and leafless throughout winter, creating a fountain-like shape, and then leaves appear during the next growing season. *F. robusta* 'Green Screen' reaches 15 to 18 feet at maturity, with shoots appearing in early spring. Its tan colored sheaths remain on the culms long enough to give the plant a striped or two-toned appearance that lights up the garden.

Of the runners, the low-growing, groundcover *Pleioblastus* is proving to be very useful. "All *Pleioblastus* species are groundcovers and make great substitutes for ivy," says Burwell. "They are low-maintenance and can be cut down with a lawn mower in the spring." These plants have thin shoots, which allow them to be cut by a blade. Although they are runners, an annual mowing can keep them under control. They reach about 2 feet and can really lighten up a dark spot. "The *Pleioblastus* varieties are compact and hardy," says Bluemel. "The leaves can be green or variegated (striped) and palmate or fern-like. They can be used for difficult sites in sun or shade as groundcover."

P. viridistriatus has yellow leaves with green stripes, 'Little Zebra' has dramatic white and green striped leaves, and 'Pygmy' and 'Green Carpet' are the popular green-leaved varieties. Although these varieties can be grown in full sun, they tolerate shade and are great for creating a bank of low-

growing, bush-like, evergreen plants.

Sasa is another runner but grows higher than Pleioblastus and has leaves that do not look like typical bamboo leaves. Sasa leaves are large and broad, but the culms are thin, like Pleioblastus, so they too can be mowed annually to control the spread. This combination of short height and large, palmate leaves creates a distinctive look in the garden. One variety with a unique aesthetic is the 3- to 5-foot tall *S. veitchii*, whose leaves change with the season. In the summer, the leaves are green, but in the winter, the margins bleach to a white, creating a very interesting two-toned effect. Other varieties include *S. minor*, which reaches 3 to 5 feet, and *S. palmata*, which can grow to 7 feet.

Phyllostachys is the tallest and most commonly seen bamboo in our area. It is also known as timber bamboo, and it can tower 15 feet and spread underground to the neighbor's yard. "Phyllostachys is good to use if you have a large estate," says Burwell. To control the spread, gardeners can try plunging a polyethylene barrier into the soil 1 1/2 to 2 feet deep, but at some point in time, this bamboo will spread beyond the plastic. Still, this giant has its uses if you have the space. It quickly becomes a grove that you can transform into a small, intimate outdoor room with culm walls and leafy ceilings. It can create very effective screens if you want to screen out a subdivision. And this particular species has the widest selection of colored culms—the two most popular are Yellow Groove, which has green culms with yellow grooves, and Black Jade, which has very unusual black culms.



"Besides the Yellow Groove and Black Jade, gardeners commonly use *P. bissetii* and *P. nuda*," Bluemel says. *P. bissetii* is one of the hardiest in this area; it is a vigorous grower that tolerates tough conditions, cold weather, and strong winds. This and *P. nuda* are good for making hedges—*P. nuda* also tolerates tough conditions.

Part of the newly founded interest in bamboo is related to how it is propagated. Bamboo is now being tissue propagated, which means that many plants can be produced quickly from a few cells in a test tube. This makes it cost effective for nurseries to sell them and increases the availability of new types, like the clumpers and groundcovers. Just keep in mind that bamboo is difficult to propagate vegetatively (e.g., by division or cutting) and flowers only once in 60 to 100 years, yielding few if any seedlings. These new efforts in propagation, plus efforts to educate customers about non-invasive species, have opened up the world of bamboo to gardeners in temperate areas. Gardeners are now able to appreciate bamboo's finer qualities, such as its graceful evergreen appearance, low maintenance requirements, sun and shade tolerance, and ability to deter deer. Gardeners can even harvest the shoots and eat them like asparagus or cut the culms to create trellises for the vegetable garden!

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