

# Bamboo Valley

“Sustainably grown bamboos”

Bamboo Grower and Landscape Contractor

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## Landscaping With Bamboo

### What's so great about landscaping with bamboo?

First of all bamboo is attractive. It is a living thing whose aura is not copied by plastic or other man-made materials. It is evergreen, yet has a light and springy air about it. Bamboo does not have the heaviness of conifers, laurels and rhododendrons. Bamboo's wide range of uses is unparalleled by any other plant for groundcover, formal and informal hedges, screens, groves, forests and forest products, building materials, crafts, food, and shelter for birds and wildlife. Bamboo is ideal for urban landscapes as it creates shade and tall screens. Bamboo rustles in the wind creating peaceful sounds. It protects the soil through its deep and extensive root system and shady canopy. Bamboos are generally easy to grow and once they are established all they need is some water and a sprinkling of compost. Once a cane or branch is cut it never regrows. Most temperate bamboos are easily controlled through root pruning by hand if you give yourself enough space around the bamboo to do the maintenance. Barriers are unnecessary, expensive, difficult to install, deleterious to bamboo, and usually fail within a few years after installation.

As a landscape plant bamboo is nearly unparalleled. Bamboos basically require only water to thrive. Unlike trees bamboo culms may be cut to a specific height from which point they never change shape or grow taller. They make effective wind screens, visual screens, and depending on the thickness sound barriers. A single row of bamboo takes up very little space but can provide much needed shade. Rhizomes preferably grow amongst the leaf duff and in the very uppermost layer of soil creating a dense, soil grabbing network. They plow their way through the hardest soils loosening it as they go, making it easier for other rhizomes and creatures to tunnel. Feeder roots and culm stabilizer roots fan out and penetrate deep into the soil (6 feet or more) providing air holes and acting as straws for water percolation. Bamboo roots and rhizomes live short lives, generally less than 5 years, and break down quickly. In this way bamboo, like other field grasses, such as alfalfa, protects and enriches the soil, increases soil friability and cohesion, and helps water move efficiently.

### Does bamboo get pests or diseases?

Bamboo is relatively pest and disease free. People are generally the only thing that is lethal to it. An unhealthy soil ecosystem makes for an unhealthy bamboo which will be attacked by mites and aphids. These, however are not lethal to bamboo. Bamboo diseases do exist but they are rare in the United States and have not been identified in Oregon. A healthy soil ecosystem will prevent many types of rot and maintain the necessary chemical balance.

### How far away from the fence should I plant my bamboo?

Ideally you won't plant your bamboo right up against a fence. Simply keep enough space between the bamboo and fence so that you can do the required maintenance—a lawnmower's width is usually sufficient. If rhizomes get into your yard and start coming up you must either dig

them out or diligently cut off their shoots. This will control their spread. Bamboo can, however, cross pretty wide distances, so watch for and cut off errant rhizomes.

### Can I grow bamboo in the shade?

Yes. Most clumping bamboos want shade. Many bamboos, however, do not grow vigorously in the shade, primarily due to competition for light and water from large trees. Bamboos often grow lanky and crooked under such conditions. The best way to grow a healthy full size bamboo in the shade is to transplant in large more-or-less full grown bamboo.

### What's the difference between bamboo runners, rhizomes, and roots?

Runners and rhizomes are the same thing. Rhizomes look like horizontal, underground, canes with their nodes close together. Each node has a bud which grows either into a new rhizome or a culm. Roots, on the other hand, are slender and grow off rhizomes or at the base of a culm. Roots, thin and fibrous, transport water and nutrients into the rhizomes. Roots do not have the ability of make more bamboo. Roots are of no importance when removing bamboo. Roots, however, are vitally important when transplanting bamboo.

### Bamboo and Your neighbors:

Chances are that your neighbor dislikes looking at you as much as you dislike looking at them. Be a good neighbor and tell your neighbor that you have this great idea to plant bamboo in between you two. They've probably thought about the same thing and would welcome the look. They might not even mind having the bamboo spread onto their property a little bit. Just tell them how to do the maintenance or to call us at Bamboo Valley.

## Selecting Your Bamboo

### How do I decide what I need from bamboo?

First determine the general height, color, and desired appearance of your bamboo. Look carefully at your light conditions. Bamboo has a wide variety of shapes and sizes and colors to choose from: large leaves and small leaves, large culms and small culms, green, yellow, black, striped, blotched, ridged or smooth culm. Generally the bigger the culm, the taller the bamboo. Whether a bamboo is a spreading type or a clump forming type should not be your first consideration. Clumping bamboos often do not have the characteristics many people want from their bamboo. Clumpers are generally short, slow growing, and weepy.

### What type of bamboo do I want for a screen?

First note whether your screen will be in the sun, or the shade, or in both. Think about how tall you want your screen to

become. *Phyllostachys aurea* does very well in the sun. Its mature height is about 20 feet. It is a stiffly upright plant with a habit of making branches and leaves close to the ground. These characteristics give it a great reputation as a screen. Many others work well, too. Generally any mature bamboo divisions will work well in the shade. Make sure, however, that from the start that you get the plants you want as you know that bamboos do not grow fast in the shade as it could take years for a small start to grow to the size and look you want.

### **Should I buy my bamboo as ball and burlap or in plastic pots?**

Bamboos do best when planted back into the ground as soon as possible after coming out of the ground. The large network of rhizomes and roots that a bamboo has means that when it is divided the first thing it will need to stay alive is water. Traditional ball and burlap technique makes it easy to get both water and air to a bamboo's roots and allows you to dig a root ball that best suits the shape of the particular bamboo's root system, which is sometimes flatter and wider, sometimes deeper and narrower. Ball and burlap is the traditional method of protecting newly divided plants and remains the cheapest and most earth friendly. Plastic pots have many drawbacks: they are expensive, consume lots of space, and do not allow for the penetration of air or water. Plastic is non-renewable and non-biodegradable. Potted bamboos quickly deteriorate, although some will quickly break out of their pots.

## **Planting, Care, and Control of Your Bamboo**

### **How do I plant and space my bamboo?**

When planting leave at least a lawnmower's width between your bamboo and anything else. This will make it possible to control the spread of your bamboo by hand. Should you be considering using some kind of machine to help with the edging make sure you have enough space for the machine. Generally space divisions 2 to 6 or more feet apart, depending on your needs and budget. Bamboo groves are usually started with divisions planted 10-15 feet on center. The bigger the bamboo the more space it will need.

### **How do I plant, water, and mulch, and fertilize my bamboo?**

Bamboos can be held for some weeks until ready to plant as long as they are kept moist. Planting bamboo is straightforward, much like planting trees. Measure the diameter of the root ball or pot with a stick and dig your hole to suit. You do not need to dig a hole much wider and deeper than this since the bamboo's roots will spread where they need to go anyway. Plant the root ball no deeper than the soil surface and initially cover it with no more than 1 inch of mulch. Bamboo roots will eventually spread sideways and straight downward 6-8 feet or more. Guy tall bamboos, or those whose root ball is not sufficiently heavy to keep it totally stable during the rooting period. You want your new bamboo to be as snug as possible so that the new roots can get quickly established in the native soil. The faster this happens the less likely your bamboo is to get stressed. Soil interface problems are generally only a problem in extremely compacted or hard soil. You can spread a little matured compost on the bottom of the hole before planting the bamboo. Upon transplant inoculate the bamboo rootball with endomycorrhizal spores. These grow into the bamboo roots and establish a symbiotic relationship while feeding your plant and helping to protect it against climatic changes. Immediately after planting water your bamboo and keep it moist for the next couple of weeks. Water regularly during the first season. An inch of water a week should be sufficient. Some people

water daily during the dry Oregon summer using drip emitters for 10-15 minutes. Mulching once or twice a year with a layer 1/8 to 1/2 inch thick of mature compost will take care of the bamboo's nutrient needs and encourage soil fauna, microorganisms and fungi. In a clay soil running bamboos will often choose the path of least resistance, right between the clay and mulch. Fertilizers are fine but can be expensive, but there is little worry about too much fertilizer since bamboos easily incorporate even quite high concentrations.

### **How do I prune, harvest, and thin out my bamboo?**

You will want to keep your bamboo cleaned out to keep it attractive and you may want to shape it so that it does not interfere with your activities. Hedges are simple as you need to prune any bamboo culm only once: once trimmed bamboo culms grow neither in height nor width. You will need to cut the new growth each year, but again, that is also only once. Bamboo is thus much easier to deal with than other evergreens which grow constantly taller and thicker. Hand tools work well with bamboo. When you trim a bamboo, cut just above and as close to the node or branch as possible. This eliminates dieback. When you cut down culms you should cut them at ground level to avoid stumps which are unsightly, dangerous, and rot slowly. Shoots should be harvested in the spring. Only allow shoots to grow where you want them to grow; cut down all others. Bamboos always send up extra shoots, and if all are unrestricted many will abort anyhow. The proper spacing for a bamboo forest is traditionally about 3 feet between culms, enough to walk between with an umbrella. Another method is to cut out all growth older than 2 or 3 years. Any time you have dead, broken, leaning, or crowded culms you should remove them. Harvested culms can be stored either vertically, or piled up horizontally.

### **How do I remove branches?**

Ideally you don't. But if you need the club method is definitely fastest. Use a 2x4 piece or a stout stick and smash off the branches with a swift downward stroke. On some bamboos this can peel off a little bit of the skin of the culm but generally if you do it fast enough you won't peel off much. Cutting off branches with pruners will leave sharp stubs.

### **I see yellow leaves. Is my bamboo dying?**

Bamboos lose and replace many leaves throughout the course of a year. Yellow leaves fall off and are replaced by new ones at about the same time. The oldest leaf in a cluster is the first one to turn yellow, die, and fall off. If you hold a branch upright, the oldest leaf is the one bottom of the cluster. Generally up to about 30% of a bamboo's leaves fall each year. In the rare case of a drowning bamboo, which can happen in very wet places or barrier situations, a much higher percentage of leaves will turn yellow, die, and fall off all at the same time. The only remedy for this is to dig out and replant your bamboo immediately.

### **How do I transplant bamboo?**

Ideally leave only one culm in the middle of the root mass you're transplanting. During transplanting prune off some branches or leaves to reduce transpiration. Keep the bamboo moist at all times. After transplanting keep the bamboo well watered for two weeks and then begin a regular irrigation program. Watch the bamboo, if its leaves start curling this is a sign of water stress. You may need to give it more water, remove more leaves, or trim off more branches.

### **How do I control the spread of my bamboo?**

Regular maintenance should be done twice a year in June and September. *Phyllostachys* bamboos usually run just under the surface. Most of the runners can be snagged with a hay hook but if they've rooted down securely you'll need a strong shovel. You can also control the spread of bamboo through cultural techniques. Take time during the year, generally in the winter, to thin out your bamboo. In addition harvest or eliminate all shoots except those that are coming up exactly where you want them to.

### **Should I use a barrier?**

Generally speaking, barriers are not effective. We do not recommend barriers of any type. They are detrimental to bamboo. If you feel you must use barriers, use them only on running bamboo, and use them only along your property line or other places of major concern. Barriers often fail because bamboo will burst through them or grow over the tops. The only effective control of bamboo in a small area is maintenance. Give your bamboo plenty of space for its growth and your maintenance.