

Bamboo Basics

Many bamboo varieties are hardy and grow well in our area. These popular grasses can be used to add a tropical touch, as a focal point, for screening, and will grow in containers for many years if desired. They range in size from 15” dwarfs to giant specimens which can reach 40’ or more, though they may not reach their mature height in the PNW.

Bamboo spreads by means of underground stems called rhizomes. *Running bamboos* have rhizomes that grow rapidly away from the parent plant before sending up new shoots. Running bamboos can cover large areas or groves unless they are controlled. *Clumping bamboo* rhizomes grow only a short distance from the parent plant, so new stems expand more slowly around the edges of the clump.

Bamboos are evergreen. However, they do drop a considerable amount of leaves and new leaf sheaths each year. If you choose to leave the leaves and sheaths, they can act as a mulch that helps keep weeds contained within the bamboo planting. The new shoots or stems are called culms. Culms do not get larger in diameter as they age; they remain the diameter they were when they emerged from the soil, and reach their mature height during the current year’s growth. New culms are produced annually and are usually taller than the previous years growth. Culms do eventually die and should be cut out at that time.

GROWING: Bamboo varies in light requirements; some species prefer shadier sites while others thrive in full sun or partial shade. Be sure and know your site conditions and select a variety that is appropriate. Although not particular about soils, if you don’t want your bamboo to spread too far, you will need to contain it (see below). Good drainage is important as standing water is a natural bamboo barrier.

Once your bamboo has been established for a few years, the new culms can grow very quickly. To encourage the most rapid growth, give them plenty of water while they are actively growing. Use a high nitrogen liquid or granular fertilizer and reapply at recommended rates during this time. Bamboo are drought tolerant once established, but they will not grow as quickly without supplemental water and fertilizer.

CONTAINING BAMBOO: If you don't want your planting to go beyond a certain point, you will need to maintain a bamboo barrier. You can buy premade bamboo barrier, or use other options such as cement walls, plastic tubs or metal flashing. Barriers should be at least 30 inches deep so rhizomes don’t grow under the barrier. If you choose not to place a barrier, or if you find occasional escapees from the barrier, you can periodically prune back the clump by cutting off new shoots with a spade or shovel. New shoots break easily and don’t resprout. Another option is to dig a trench about 12 to 15 inches deep around the bamboo and sever any rhizomes as they cross the trench. Fill the trench with sand or fallen leaves if desired.

Additional reading:

<https://lewisbamboo.com/blogs/bamboo-tips/choosing-the-right-bamboo-species-for-washington-a-comprehensive-guide>



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Rev.
10/30/24