A Greener View: Bamboo sprouts just about anywhere

by Jeff_Rugg

Q: For years I have loved bamboo but thought I could never grow it where I live in northern Illinois. However, a friend tells me I am wrong. He says several species of bamboo grow quite well this far north. I have never seen bamboo growing here. I would love to grow a species that is 10 feet or taller. I have an acre I could put it on. Can you tell me the names of any species that would grow here without any winter protection?

A: Your friend is right. There are several bamboo species that do well in your area. In fact, for all of the United States except for the northern half of the states that run from Montana to Maine which are in climate zone three, there are bamboo species that will grow just fine.

Worldwide, there are more than 1,500 varieties of bamboo. Several are native to North America.

Bamboo is in the grass family and some species grow as tall as 100 feet while others reach only a few inches. Some are native to tropical climates and some come from temperate zones.

Like grass, there are three major parts to a bamboo plant:

- Rhizome. The rhizome, or root, spreads along or under the ground. On some clumping varieties the rhizome stays put, but on some spreading varieties it can grow 10 to 30 feet in a year.

- Culm. The culm, or cane, is the shoot that grows for about two months to a full height (never to grow again) and lasts from two to five years.

- Leaf. The leaf grows on the cane and remains evergreen over winter. It dies in spring and is simultaneously replaced on the cane by new leaves.

Bamboo colonies are one plant. Along the outer edges you find the young rhizomes, which produce short canes. The older rhizomes close to the center sprout larger canes.

It takes several years for a new colony to become established and for canes to begin growing to their full potential. Most new colonies are created by digging up young rhizomes along the edge of the colony, where short and easy-to-handle canes grow, and transplanting them.

Bamboo plants almost never bloom and rarely produce seeds when they do. Some colonies have been known to grow more than 100 years without blooming. Amazingly, some varieties that have had colonies transplanted all over the globe will bloom all at once. Unfortunately, some varieties expend so much energy blooming that the whole colony dies.

Clumping varieties of bamboo tend to become overgrown with canes and require a lot of pruning to maintain their beauty. Bamboo rhizomes spread sideways and can damage foundations.

The rhizomes of running varieties are less forceful, but often need to be contained. A root barrier should be installed when bamboo is planted. There are several methods that work well, especially those from DeepRoot Co.

Mowing canes as they sprout only kills those canes. The rhizome will keep spreading until new canes sprout where they don't get mowed.

The only problem I see for your is that you want tall bamboo. As you go farther north, bamboos tend to grow shorter. There is a shorter growing season, so even though the culms only grow for a short time each summer, there is not much time left in the season for the rhizome to store food to produce the next year's growth.

For each plant hardiness zone north you go, you lose about a third of the plant's height. A 30-foot grower in zone 7 is 20 feet tall in zone 6, then only 15 feet tall in zone 5 and 10 feet tall in zone 4.

The Chicago Botanic Garden performed a five-year test on more than a dozen bamboo species and the tallest one only reached 4 to 5 feet tall. They recommend about six species that have 100 percent rhizome survival, but canes only survived 50 percent to 75 percent of the winters in a few species.

Bamboo makes a good windbreak as the top branches lock together in a wind and the whole grove supports itself, unlike trees that get damaged when they hit each other in high winds. Hurricane-prone areas could benefit from the wind and erosion protection bamboo provides. Bamboo also makes a good screen to block out bad views.

Depending on their size, bamboo canes have many uses. The canes naturally die after a few years, so you will have a steady supply of bamboo poles. Bamboo shoots are edible and, like asparagus, are harvested as they sprout.

You might think that bamboo furniture, flooring, skateboards and clothing would look like something from "Gilligan's Island" or "Lost," but it is not only attractive but nice to touch. Depending on what you do with it, bamboo can be hard as oak or soft as silk. Not only do bamboo products look like regular wood, but they grow much faster and require significantly fewer resources to produce.

Bamboo clothing, towels and sheets are much softer than cotton. Bamboo cloth is antimicrobial, so it inhibits body odor. It is three times more absorbent than cotton. T-shirts made of bamboo release heat and moisture

better than cotton T's, so they feel several degrees cooler.

Check out the bathrobes, socks and other apparel available at www.bambooclothes.com and the furniture at www.ecodesignz.com. Another good source of information is the American bamboo society at www.americanbamboo.org.

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