

Bamboo

Bamboo is a fast growing grass that can range in size from 6 inches to over 70 feet tall. Above ground bamboo consists of 'culms' (canes) which are sectioned by a solid ring called a 'node.' The familiar hollow portion is the 'internode.' Branches, leaves and flowers provide the soothing sound of this graceful plant. No matter the species or variety, bamboo brings atmosphere to any garden making lovely screens or specimen plants. Bamboo spreads through underground modified stems called rhizomes. Growth of these rhizomes is shallow and sideways. Spring is when the plant puts out its new above-ground shoots; whereas, late summer and fall is when the rhizomes are elongating actively (running species) and forming buds for growth in the year to come (clumping species). *Clumping* bamboo will spread several inches a year while *running* bamboo can reach several feet or more and generally needs to be controlled.

RUNNING VS. CLUMPING

Prior to planting bamboo in your garden, be aware of maintenance needs and growth habit, as they are different in running vs. clumping bamboos. This distinction is an important one for smart gardening—large spans of concrete or asphalt will NOT prevent running varieties from spreading!

The rhizomes of running bamboos grow rapidly at varying distances from the parent plant before they even send up shoots. Eventually, this type of bamboo will form large patches/groves. Although the growing season varies greatly in running varieties, it is generally April to September.

In clumping bamboos, the rhizomes grow from the edges of the parent clump by only a few inches prior to sending up shoots. Although the clump expands, it does so relatively slowly.

CULTURAL NEEDS

Sun/Shade Exposure: The sun exposure varies by type of bamboo. Very generally speaking, most clumping bamboo looks best in filtered sunlight; whereas, most of the large timber bamboos need full sun.

Soil: Slightly acidic (soil pH of 5.5-6.0), well drained, loamy soil is best (working Black Forest Compost helps condition the soil by adding nutrients and increasing ability to drain well). In the fall your plants will also appreciate compost worked into the soil and/or used as a top dressing.

Water Requirements: Water deeply and frequently for the most successful growth of newly planted bamboo. In this case, 'deeply' refers to soaking the soil a minimum of 12 inches around the plant (running types) or around the base of the plant (clumping types). Many varieties of bamboo, once established, can tolerate moderate drought but definitely look their best with regular water. In general, it takes new plantings 2 to 3 years to become established. During this time, thoroughly water 1 to 2 times per week, weather dependent. Once established, watering needs decrease to 1 to 2 inches weekly during the growing season (April to September). Use caution to avoid overwatering your plants—foliage will yellow with tip die back and new canes will rot. Should the leaves curl into a "V" shape, the plant is experiencing water stress from lack of enough water — water it immediately.

Feeding: Because it is the largest member of the grass family, bamboo is in constant need of nutrients, so proper fertilization is crucial to its health. Plants in the ground need to be feed during their growing season, which is generally April through September. Use a fertilizer high in nitrogen such as Dr. Earth Blood Meal, Bat Guano, or Life. A **non** weed & feed lawn fertilizer may also be used.

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Pruning and Care: Bamboo can be trimmed once a year, best done after the growing season. This is also a suitable time to perform some maintenance by cutting back any dead or older culms; the culms typically have a lifespan of 15 years. Cuts should be made just above the node so as not to create dead remnants; canes that have been cut will never again grow in height. “Legging up” (trimming branches from the base of the cane upward) not only exposes the beauty of the canes, but it also increases air circulation to the rhizome system. Late February/early March is the time to mow or clear-cut (cut down to the ground) groundcover (small running) bamboo to allow it to produce vibrant, healthy new growth.

SCREENS AND HEDGES

Bamboo can also be shaped as other traditional hedge plants. After the new canes (culms) are done growing in the spring or summer they can be cut to the appropriate height. To control the size or height, you can prune any fresh shoots that are larger in diameter than the culms at the right height. These will be replaced by culms that are smaller.

Some examples of bamboos that are good for screens:

Phyllostachys species (hardy, running, sun)

Fargesia nitida (hardy, clumping, part shade)

Fargesia robusta (hardy, clumping, sun or shade)

Fargesia rufa (hardy, clumping, sun or shade, fast grower)

ROOT BARRIER

Bamboo barrier is the most effective way to contain small running bamboo (‘groundcovers’), growing a maximum of 6 to 8 feet tall and have smaller rhizomes that the barrier easily contains.

Material to use: plastic HDPE (high density polyethylene) 60 mil by 30 inch deep

How to install root barrier:

1. Measure the area you are planting so you can enclose it with a single sheet of barrier. You will want to overlap the barrier by one foot. Use stainless steel strips to secure.
2. Ensure the soil next to the barrier is compacted; air pockets will encourage the rhizomes to go down under the barrier. Place the barrier around the perimeter leaving 2-3” above ground to discourage rhizomes from spreading over the surface.
3. Because the goal is to discourage the plant’s rhizomes from going deep and potentially going under the barrier, it is important to remember NOT to add amendments to the soil at the bottom of the planting hole. Usually the rhizomes will grow in the top few inches of soil; however, should they encounter air pockets and/or loose soil, they may go deeper and potentially under the barrier.
4. Finally, *monitor* the bamboo yearly (fall is a good time) to cut any rhizomes that have crossed the barrier. Planting bamboo near a pond or water is a good way to control growth.

GROWING IN CONTAINERS

Many bamboos will do well in containers that are at least two feet tall and wide. (Note: ceramic or clay planters can be broken by the encircling rhizomes of running varieties!) Use soil that has good drainage and feed monthly with high nitrogen, slow release fertilizer (such as Osmocote) when it is actively growing. During the winter, slow down feeding to half or quarter strength. For larger bamboo, use a container that is twice as wide as it is tall. Lining the inside of the pot with Styrofoam will protect the roots during freeze-thaw cycles and heat in the summer.