

Yes, Canadians can grow bamboo



MARJORIE HARRIS
DIG THIS

Bamboo is a hot commodity in today's design world. It's being used for everything from sustainable flooring to sculptural decor elements to the handles of chic handbags. But how many Canadians realize it can be grown in their gardens?

Jim Lounsbury has been growing bamboo for 25 years at his nursery in Vineland, Ont. He's learned what it can do in our climate and what it can't. He cautions gardeners not to have expectations based on European books and magazines. Our cooler climate and shorter growing season will mean the plants won't be as lush or grow that high — except if you live in British Columbia, of course. In fact, one of the best information

sites on this plant is the B.C.-based www.bambooworld.com (or call 604-596-2090).

There are two types of bamboo: dumpers and spreaders. If you have acres of space, choose a spreader. But this can be very invasive, and Lounsbury suggests that you contain it. A Rubbermaid garbage can sunk into the ground is effective in Ontario, but in British Columbia a one-metre barrier of concrete is more like it.

Bamboo is a grass and, like all grasses, it grows quickly and needs a lot of nitrogen. Ordinary grass fertilizer will work, but Lounsbury prefers a humus-rich mulch about 10 centimetres thick. The fascinating leaves must be left on the ground since they contain a silica that is like a hit of Aspirin for the plant. Most bamboos thrive in the sun, but Lounsbury says they are just fine in partial shade. He is also convinced that bamboo planted from now until midsummer will probably do better than autumn-planted bamboo. Last winter was a prime example. It was harsh and his bamboos were wiped out at the top, but those with well-estab-

lished roots have come back luxuriantly from the base.

A major misconception about bamboo concerns the amount of water it needs. It looks perfect by a pond and likes moist soil. But bamboos can't stand in water — they'll either drown or their growth will be inhibited.

Know the Latin name if you have a special bamboo in mind, and acquire a minimum of lingo. For instance, you should know that a culm — as in "My bamboo has black culms" — is the jointed stem that makes bamboo look like bamboo.

Phyllostachys are the most easily available of the spreaders, or "runners," which can be killed to the ground but pop up again in spring. They will grow from 2.4 to 24 metres in about 10 years, but if you whack at the culms, you can keep them at the height you want.

In Europe, black bamboo is the designer choice. *Phyllostachys nigra* will need protection even in Zone 6 (heavily mulched), but the black culms are stunning. Also striking is *Phyllostachys bambusoides* "Castillon," which has a

bright yellow stalk with a lime-green stripe, and is hardy to minus 18.

Clumpers grow slowly from the main root system. They are more difficult to propagate and therefore a little more expensive.

Bamboos aren't cheap. They can cost from about \$60 upward into the hundreds for the rarest forms of dumpers. But in the right spot, it's worth the price. I've seen people use the golden bamboo (*Phyllostachys aurea*) to disguise an ugly-looking brick wall, or in a combination with the tall, sweeping zebra grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* Zebrinus) beside a graceful rock for a stunning and unusual treatment at the corner of the house. I can't think of a better container plant for a balcony or deck to get a rather dreamy Oriental look. And how they filter light is magic.

Jim Lounsbury will hold a workshop called Beautiful Bamboos at the Civic Garden Centre in Toronto on June 16. Call 416-397-1340 to reserve.

Marjorie Harris is the editor-in-chief of Gardening Life magazine.



Phyllostachys bambusoides 'Castillon': Gorgeous bamboo variety is hardy to minus 18 degrees.