

THE CALIFORNIA GARDEN

THE HAUTE BAMBOO

Exotic species -- stunning in size and wild in color -- have become hot commodities with a fervent following.

[HOME EDITION]

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THEY are traipsing around Cliff Sussman's home in La Verne, navigating a steep hillside that's wildly overgrown with bamboo -- scores of tropical and subtropical species spreading underground, thick cones and tender new shoots poking up as robust mature specimens tilt against one another, fighting for space and light.

Sussman has labeled some of his plants but admits with a grin that he's not 100% sure what's what. The nomenclature is often questionable, the taxonomy ill-defined, even to fanatical collectors like his visitors, members of the American Bamboo Society gathered for a tour. After all, the plant comes in more than 1,200 forms, excluding the mutations and as-yet-unidentified subspecies. More than its usefulness as a privacy screen or the instant tranquillity its arched branches and fluttering leaves can impart on even the smallest urban garden, it is this ancient grass' astounding diversity that inspires the cult of bamboo.

Exotic varieties are graced with stalks -- culms is the technical term -- in black, brown, purple or orange. They can be striped, mottled or tortoiseshell, as thin as a pencil or as fat as a telephone pole. On some species, leaves are feathered like fine lace. On others, they are 2 feet long and as wide as a hand. The number of possibilities seem astronomical -- and at times, so do the prices.

"There was a tortoiseshell bamboo that sold for \$9,000 -- a 5-gallon pot," says Bob Dimattia, better known as Bamboo Bob, a collector, propagator and seller of the plant in Vista, Calif., and a director of the American Bamboo Society. "I got a black bamboo on my property that was basically two twigs in a pot -- \$1,200," he says, referring to the price he paid. "The passion of the collectors is the drive."

That passion will be on full display Sept. 16, when the American Bamboo Society holds its next sale at Quail Botanical Gardens in Encinitas. The twice-yearly event draws nearly 1,000 collectors from all over the country in search of the most exotic specimens. Frequenters of past sales say the event has, at times, been marked by frenzied buying, with some collectors going so far as to

work in teams -- one as a blocker and the other as a grabber.

The things people will do for great bamboo.

GIVEN the abundant varieties available in nurseries and online, it's no wonder some gardeners go a little crazy. Bamboo can grow straight or curved, in clumps that are round or square. Nodes, the joint-like divisions of the culm, can be smooth, knobby, even diamond-shaped.

But any complete discussion of bamboo has to start with the one constant: the plant's infamous reputation. Bamboo can be invasive, and it's easy to lose a garden to a little plant bought in a 5-gallon tub. Three years after it lands in the ground, it may rule your garden -- and your neighbor's.

Perhaps the two most popular bamboos that have contributed to this reputation are golden bamboo (*Phyllostachys aurea*) and black bamboo (*Phyllostachys nigra*). Both are runners, the type of temperate bamboo that collectors say has a three-year growth cycle: The first year it sleeps, the second year it creeps and the third year it leaps. Rhizomes, the food-storing stems that grow underground, can spread rapidly, undetected, before sending up shoots.

Not so with the prized subtropical and tropical clumping bamboos. Clumpers are well-mannered by comparison. Their rhizomes grow short distances before sending out shoots in an expanding circle, as the name implies. They propagate fast, some rising 100 feet with culms that are 10 inches in diameter. "When someone walks into my yard, the first thing I tell them is that everything I talk about is a clumper," says Jim Rehor, a retired electrician who fell in love with bamboo 10 years ago and became a dealer.

He has more than 200 species sprouting in hundreds of 5- and 25-gallon tubs covering his Chino Hills garden. Among his donations to the Los Angeles County Arboretum is a rare and expensive Indian bamboo that has grown into a graceful 30-foot black clump arcing down the path from the park's bamboo tunnel.

"I started out as a collector like most of us but then realized you could divide them and make more, and people buy them and even fight over them," Rehor says. "People go crazy."

Rehor supplied most of the bamboo that An Do planted at his home in Garden Grove, a corner lot close to Little Saigon. His tidy frontyard is just like his neighbors': neat lawn, cinder-block wall, a few short palms. It won't be that way for long. Do planted six giant clumpers including one of the most popular tropicals, *Bambusa beecheyana*, and one of the most prized, *Dendrocalamus asper*, a speedy grower whose black culm can rise to 100 feet.

"I know one man who had one of these. It was a little stalk in a pot -- just like a No. 2 pencil," Do says. "After two years he had about 30 huge bamboos. Unbelievable."

He points to a month-old planting with a 12-foot shoot. The secret, he says, is daily watering, loose soil and leaf mulch that provides enough silica to keep the plant happy.

He's most proud of his *Dendrocalamus giganteus*, a species with leaves up to 20 inches long and a native to his home country, Vietnam. For Do, bamboo is a deep part of his identity. Bamboo grew everywhere in the Mekong Delta, he

says, where his family fled after the fall of Saigon.

"If you went into my house in Vietnam you could not find a nail." Do says. "It was 100% bamboo -- the rafters, the posts, twine, tools. I loved it. You come home and just look at it, and it relieves all your stress."

Ed Reyes of Montebello echoes the sentiment for bamboo's sway over the senses.

"When I was a kid I wanted to grow bamboo," he says. "It was exotic and beautiful, and you see so many different colors. Sitting here and hearing the wind rustling the leaves and the creaking -- it's like being on a ship. It's so soothing, so peaceful. My oasis."

His home is just 20 minutes east of downtown, on a double lot bordered by train tracks and a school bus parking lot across the street. When Reyes was growing up here, his parents grew fig trees and passion fruit. When he inherited the property, he decided to fulfill a childhood dream, transforming the baking backyard into his own private Gilligan's Island in the city, complete with a bamboo canopy.

Five years ago he started buying runners and a few clumpers, including the clumping giant timber bamboo, *Bambusa oldhamii*, sold at many nurseries. Now the runners are all corralled in pots, and the *B. oldhamii* is being given away slowly, replaced by a dozen more exotic species including a wispy Mexican weeping bamboo (*Otatea acuminata aztecorum*), a Timor black (*Bambusa lako*) rising in broad V-shaped clump, a stand of green- and yellow-striped painted bamboo (*Bambusa vulgaris 'Vittata'*, also called golden Hawaiian bamboo) and a *D. asper* that started as a finger-size stalk four years ago. Now it's 30 feet high with dozens of black culms.

"This is like a young adult," Reyes says. "He'll get 50, 60 feet high."

Why bamboo? Reyes doesn't have to think: "Instant gratification."

FOR most bamboo collectors, speed is a large part of the appeal. The plant's legendary growth -- up to 2 feet a day in optimal conditions for some species -- is achievable with a minimum amount of gardening acumen. It's hard to kill bamboo.

"They call it ironweed in China," Dimattia says. "It's what comes up after everything else is dead and gone."

Unfortunately, as soon as the plant enters its once-a-lifetime flowering cycle, it's almost impossible to save. Each bamboo has an inner clock that runs for decades, sometimes a century or longer. When a species finally enters the flowering cycle, nearly all of that species produces flowers and sets large quantities of seed at the same time, sometimes for years. The process is called gregarious flowering. Then, for reasons researchers don't entirely understand, most of the species dies.

"It's very strange," Dimattia says. "No other plant does that."

For homeowners who have seen their yards taken over by running bamboo, mortality isn't such a bad thing.

Tim Phillips, formerly horticulture director at Quail Botanical Gardens and now the superintendent at the L.A. County Arboretum, knows something about how to kill, or at least control, invasive bamboo. One runner took over a quarter of an

acre in the arboretum, squeezing out other bamboos and palms. Stopping it required a three-pronged approach: cutting it back, letting it grow to 3 feet, then applying weed killer. The process had to be repeated three times.

"You have to be as tenacious as the bamboo," Phillips says. "You have to wear it down."

Or you can try a plastic or cement barrier. That was the approach that Drew Zager tried at his Holmby Hills home, where he wanted screens to block noise from nearby Sunset Boulevard as well as a new house next door. He needed to control his extensive bamboo plantings, which includes a few runners such as the *Phyllostachys viridis* 'Robert Young' (yellow with green stripes) and the 'Reverse Robert Young' (green with yellow stripes).

"I actually like the runner because it's cheaper," he says. "I bought this very tropical house and wanted to continue the tropical feel. Everybody said, 'Don't do bamboo. It'll take over.' Yes, but not if you do the preparation."

Zager considered digging a trench and putting down a 36-inch concrete barrier, but he decided on a root barrier instead. The 20-millimeter-thick liner, when planted at a slant at least 3 feet down, will prevent runners from spreading, according to the arboretum's Phillips.

It's true that runners are less expensive -- some only \$10 to \$30 for a 1-gallon container -- and in many cases they're more ornamental. In contrast, a popular clumper such as *Otatea fimbriata* can be \$150 a pop, while a rare 60-foot black giant such as *D. asper* 'Hitam' can be three times as much.

Costly, yes, which perhaps is why the most consistent advice from collectors is to plan thoroughly before you spend. Some plants droop, others grow straight. You need imagination to envision how an 80-foot bush will play out in your garden.

What you don't need is patience.

This is bamboo.

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(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

A touch of earthy decor

Bamboo continues to be the darling of the eco-minded because it's a fast-growing, renewable resource. Designers and manufacturers keep finding new, sometimes surprising ways of employing the material. Among the latest: [see photo captions]

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A guide to get the bamboo going

When buying bamboo, consider the species' height and tendency to droop. The Species Source List at www.americanbamboo.org explains how various bamboo will behave. Choosing the right one is critical. A bamboo such as *Bambusa multiplex* 'Alphonse Karr' may be popular but prove susceptible to mealybugs. Advice from local growers:

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Recommended
species

Mexican weeping bamboo. *Otatea acuminata aztecorum*. A droopy variety with fine, narrow leaves. Grows to 20 feet. Drought-resistant.

Tropical black bamboo. *Gigantochloa atrovioacea*. Green culms turn black-brown after a year. Grows to 50 feet, sometimes higher.

Weaver's bamboo. *Bambusa textilis*. Grows in tight clumps, 20- to 30-feet tall. Small leaves. Green culms.

Buddha's belly bamboo. *Bambusa ventricosa*. Culms can grow to 30 feet, sometimes higher, and have distinctive bulging internodes, usually when grown in containers or poor soil. Green culms turn gold when mature. Also available in dwarf version, *B. vulgaris* 'Wamin,' which grows to 16 feet and also has swollen internodes.

Mountain bamboo. *Chusquea circinata*. From Mexico. Dark drooping culms. Some *Chusquea* will climb onto surrounding trees.

Care

Maintenance: Do not rake away all the fallen leaves because they keep the soil soft and moist and provide a source of silica, essential to healthy bamboo. For optimum growth, you will have to fertilize regularly. Newly planted specimens may need a gallon of water or more a day.

Young plants: Too much water or fertilizer can kill tender plants, however. Water in small doses several times daily.

Pots: Bamboo will grow in containers, although less vigorously.

Resources

Pura Vida Tropicals: At Bob Dimattia's home-based nursery, you can see or buy 135 types of bamboo on 1 acre. By appointment only. 1541 Sunset Drive, Vista. (760) 519-0397.

Quail Botanical Gardens: Home of the American Bamboo Society and site of what many regard as the country's best collection of rare bamboo. 230 Quail Gardens Drive, Encinitas; (760) 436-3036, www.qbgardens.com.

RainForest Bamboos: Jim Rehor's business, by appointment only. 15583 Aspen Court, Chino Hills; (909) 597-5316; www.rainforestbamboos.com.

-- Jeff Spurrier

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: THROUGH THICK AND THIN: Colorful *Bambusa lako*, also known as Timor striped *Bambusa ventricosa*, or Buddha's belly, second from left, stays relatively small except for bamboo for its quick growth, resiliency and ability to add instant tranquillity.; PHOTOGRAPHER: AMONG US: A towering *Dendrocalamus asper*, above, is a speedy clumper whose black stalks less invasive than other bamboo. At right, green- and yellow-striped *Bambusa vulgaris* 'Vittata,' bamboo in Jim Rehor's Chino Hills garden.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Don Bartletti Los Angeles Tim Space International designed La Cuesta, a Nichols Canyon home, left, to accommodate indoor Ferguson Landscapes to choose the right timber bamboo, *Phyllostachys vivax*, which functions the eaves. At right, the yellow-with-green-stripe runner bamboo *Phyllostachys viridis* 'Robert Yo and other bamboo as a screen to block street noise. "I actually like the runner because it's chea continue the tropical feel," he says.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Joshua White; PHOTO: WELCOME: At *B vulgaris* 'Vittata,' above, shades the front walkway and is one of 12 varieties of bamboo on the g giganteus rises from the surface. When fully grown, it will have leaves up to 20 inches long.; PHOTO: TABLETOP Bambu's latest innovations include cutlery and lightweight occasional plat

