

Bamboo and Your Pond

By Gordon Powell

It is generally bad for business to talk someone out of buying your plants or products. But as responsible nurserymen and greenhouse owners know, some plants just should not be introduced to certain areas. The water hyacinth immediately comes to mind. And no matter how much I would love to get rid of the *Vinca major* in the backyard (and side yard and front yard), I will never pot it up and sell it to some unsuspecting gardener.

While I do not consider running bamboo an invasive plant, this is merely a personal bias. Most hardy bamboo will take over if you let it. Twenty-five years ago, my sister-in-law planted the yellow groove bamboo, *Phyllostachys aureosulcata* (pictured in “Pond and Garden”, Vol. 2 #2), next to a field in Northern Baltimore County, Maryland (Zone 6). The one-acre patch is now a magnificent grove with mature canes upward of 2” in diameter.

The problem is, last year it ate a volleyball court. I would not be surprised if it grew to 2 acres in a few years. No attempt has been made to control it and a serious effort would be required to contain it now. It is a beautiful grove but *might* not fit in a smaller garden.

Now back to my original story ... The reason I talked the guy out of planting bamboo was he wanted to put it behind his new pond. He had just finished a well-crafted, home-made pond with a 45 mil EPDM liner. All the stonework and plantings were his own. The bamboo would look beautiful, creating a textured hedge for a backdrop casting reflections on the water. In about two or three years, the bamboo would start to look pretty good. It would also be growing towards the moist area under the pond, the sharp rhizomes eventually piercing the 45 mil liner.

Linda Siler of O’Quinn’s Water Gardens in Springfield, Missouri, and frequent contributor to P&G, has been fighting a *Phyllostachys* species for years. If you ask her about it, she makes funny faces and growls a little. Ian and Phyllis Donnelly (featured in P&G, Vol. 2 #1) also reported a piercing of their pond liner. And this was a dwarf variety! These folks live in upper Zone 6 where the winters usually slow a bamboo down. However, when it’s cold, the pond helps insulate the ground below it, and the bamboo will tend to grow towards the warmer soil.

Don’t despair. Bamboo *can* be contained, controlled and used around ponds. But careful planning, and site and species selection should be considered. Containment systems employing sound techniques should be designed into a landscape plan to keep the bamboo away from the liner.

On the other hand, a large pond without a liner can be an excellent site for bamboo. We have just started site plans for the restoration of an existing half-acre pond and surrounding woodlands. The owners want to introduce plant species that will attract and sustain wildlife.

On the far berm, we will plant bamboo. When mature, the complex web of rhizomes will help stabilize the berm. The grove will tower above the water, casting delicate reflections on the pond's surface. The bamboo will not grow into the pond as water is a natural barrier. When the grove has reached a reasonable size, the new shoots can be harvested for food and the canes harvested for fences, or other garden structures. Carefully maintained, the stand of bamboo will be a beautiful addition to the landscape, and provide a sustainable crop in just a few years.

Another possibility for northern gardeners is to grow the hardy clumping bamboos. Many of the mountain bamboos are non-invasive, and can survive more severe winters than other bamboos. *Fargesia* species are the most common, slowly growing between six to twenty feet tall. Most do not tolerate the extended heat of southern summers so careful selection is an important consideration.

If you have any questions about using bamboo around your pond or garden, give us a call at 501-253-6801, or email bamboos@cswnet.com.