

TOM'S BAMBOO

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Container Planting

Generally, growing bamboo in containers follows the same rules as growing bamboo anywhere else. Because it is a limited area, there are some additional considerations. To ensure success, put extra effort in at the beginning. The first thing you need to think about is what are the characteristics of the plant you are looking for? Some folks may want a bamboo to grow tall, others may want something that puts out a lot of canes, and others may want something with character. The location of the plant may narrow down your choices somewhat. Generally, most bamboo can take a large variation of sunlight. About the only thing that is not recommended for a bamboo in a container is 100% sunlight. You will constantly be watering the plant and it still will not look great. Some other things to consider as you decide on a bamboo are the cold rating and the height range. Generally you would need to add about 10-15 degrees to the cold rating and subtract about a third of the height range if you keep it in a pot. So, if you find a bamboo that is rated as 15 degrees and 15-20 feet tall, in a pot that would translate to a cold rating a minimum of 30 degrees and a height of 10-14 feet.

Okay, so you decided on the bamboo and you have the location. Three things to think about now are location, container, and soil.

LOCATION So what's up, didn't we already consider location when we were deciding what bamboo to get? Well, you've got the general location, but there are some specifics to consider. First of all, if it is going to be in a patio area, keep it out from under the eaves. What you don't want is for the canes to hit the eaves. You also want the rain to naturally water the plant whenever possible. The rain waters the leaves as much as the root ball, which is what the bamboo needs. Secondly, if you are putting it on a deck or on the grass or gravel, put a drip pan under the pot. Bamboo is very intelligent. If there is one small drain hole on the bottom of the pot, it will send a rhizome through that hole in hopes of hitting the ground. Thirdly, in the winter, try to keep it out of the direct path of the Northeasters. Not only is the Northeaster a very cold wind, but it is also a very dry wind, and the dry part is what does the most damage. If it is in the path of the Northeaster, try to move the plant closer to a wall or bunch them together with the larger and more mature plants on the outside and the smaller and younger plants in the middle and don't forget to water the root balls during the cold stretch. A frozen root ball is preferable to a dried out one.

CONTAINER Think BIG. For most medium size bamboo, think cedar tub or whiskey barrel. Bamboo are like icebergs, there is more happening below the surface than above, and the more space the roots have, the happier the bamboo will be. A general rule of thumb is at least 3 times the size of the pot you bought it in. So if it is in a 3 gallon container, you should think of transplanting it into a 10 gallon container. If it is in a 5 gallon container, think 15 gallon container or cedar tub. As for the shape of the pot, don't think fashion model, think couch potato. In other words, tall and slim is out, short and fat is in. Most plastic pots come in a regular size and an "S" size. Always choose the "S" size because it is shorter in height and has a bigger diameter. Also, if you're thinking decorative pottery, stay away from a pot belly shape because you will have trouble taking out the roots when it comes time to transplant. Tub shape is perfect, straight wall is good. If you absolutely have to plant in a pot belly shaped container, it is better to plant it in a plastic pot and insert it in the container.

SOIL Although you can start with the soil from your ground, it might be easier to get soil from a bag, especially if you have the misfortune of having that famous clay in your yard that Whatcom County is known for. Always buy top soil instead of potting soil and mix it with equal parts of bagged steer manure and compost. You want to start with a rich mixture for your soil just so you don't have to continuously change your soil. For those that like lining the bottom of your pots with rocks or Styrofoam pellets for drainage, I found that it only takes up space and the bamboo prefers that space to be taken up with more soil. Every year after the first year, it is good to start off in the spring by giving the roots a shot of steer manure either by placing a 1/2 inch layer in the pot, or by making some manure tea. After that, putting it on a regular fertilization schedule will keep the bamboo happy. For granulated fertilizer a two month schedule between March and October works fine. A balanced fertilizer formula is best.

PLANTING Start with a large enough pot so the plant can live for a few years without repotting. Also a larger container holds more soil and more water and is more stable in windy weather. Place a couple of inches of soil mix in the bottom of the pot, then check to see if the top of the root ball is 1&1/2-2" below the rim of the pot, you may need to add more soil at this point. Remove the root ball and loosen the rhizomes and the water roots in order to spread them out for better soil contact. Replace the plant into the pot and backfill with the soil mix lightly covering the top of the root ball. Pack the soil well and water thoroughly. Don't forget to spray the leaves.

MAINTAINING AND RE-POTTING Maintenance is fairly easy, you will always want to take out weak or dead canes every spring. You can give the plant a bit of a trim if you feel the need as container plants usually suffer a bit more in the winter. A light fertilizing or some manure tea and you will be ready to enjoy your bamboo for another season. When the pot seems to be filling up with canes and the foliage looks sickly you will need to repot your plant. Usually you will get 2-4 years growth out of the bamboo before you need to repot.

WATERING Bamboos in pots are easy to care for as long as they are not allowed to dry out. Most bamboo do not like the soil to be constantly moist and so watering two or three times a week is more than enough for most plants, and definitely forget about watering in the rainy months. People often times do not realize that winters can also be dry. Cold does not necessarily mean wet, and so you should remember to water your bamboo at least once or twice a week in the dry winter times. If your lips are feeling like they are chapping, water you container plants immediately as they are also drying out.

Following these basic steps should ensure a happy container bamboo.