

Bamboo boom

Bamboo is back in fashion



The world's fastest growing plant, bamboo, is a big trend in Australia, according to gardening experts who say now is as good a time as any to enhance your garden with it.

Chris Cusack, who owns Bamboo World on the NSW north coast, says after 20 years in the business, bamboo is finally booming.

"It's become far more mainstream," Cusack said from his specialist nursery in Alstonville, about 750km north of Sydney.

"We get customers saying bamboo's a bit of a trend at the moment."

Cusack, who provides a wealth of information on the aspects of each bamboo variety from his website www.bambooworld.com.au, said bamboo was once seen as a collector's item but larger outlets are now getting on board.

"You used to get the odd enthusiastic garden centre who decided to dabble into trying it ... now it's at the point where it's regularly stocked by a number of retail outlets."

Cusack stocks about 25 different varieties of bamboo including 'collector's plants' like ebony-coloured bamboo Betung Hitam, or more mainstream varieties Nepalese Blue and Striped Weavers' Bamboo, which are 'mostly used for screening'. But the most popular plant is the Himalayan Weeping Bamboo, a lush, 'small garden variety' that is well suited to cooler Australian climates.

Horticultural editor at *ABC Gardening Australia* magazine Debbie McDonald says the secret to successful bamboo growing lies

in understanding that there are two varieties – clumping and running.

Running varieties, like robust Black Bamboo, produce creeping underground stems, called rhizomes, and sprout countless shoots. If not tightly controlled, they can invade neighbouring properties.

"There are loads of disasters with running bamboos," Cusack said. McDonald said the reckless nature of 'nightmare' running bamboos have caused most local councils across Australia to ban them, making them hard to get hold of. She said some councils had issued a blanket ban on bamboo without

mature height in two years," McDonald said. "So if you want to have screening between your neighbours for instance, you can pretty much get that in a couple of years."

"If you're planting a tree or a shrub you're waiting quite a few more years than that unless you put in really established plants."

As well as providing privacy from nosy neighbours and a soft textile for sheets, bamboo is used for building furniture, shelter, flooring and instruments and all 1500 varieties in the world can be eaten.

The woody shoot is high in potassium and calcium and, according to Chinese medicine, bamboo shavings, leaves and sap can be used to cure vomiting and fevers. While most are native to China and other parts of Asia, there are three varieties that are restricted to northern Australia, *Mullerochloa Moreheadiana*,

Neololeba Atra and *Bambusa Arnhemica*, which was used to make didgeridoos. As a designer, McDonald uses bamboo in perennial, 'really flowery, cottage style gardens'.

"You use it as a really lovely vertical accent in a garden and because of the nature of the leaves it gives you lots of movement as well," she said.

"Just because of the way they hang and they're actually quite soft too and you hear that sound too of the noise of the wind through the leaves, a really soft rustle. (They're) very, very ornamental and decorative."

By Nicky Park

“The secret to successful bamboo growing lies in understanding that there are two varieties – clumping and running”

realising there were two varieties.

"It's not a good thing because there are all these clumping bamboos which are incredibly useful in the garden", she said.

Bamboo, a type of grass, is a renewable source and is constantly rejuvenating, growing up to 3m each year until it reaches maturity.

"You can see it growing every year and it changes through the seasons", Cusack said.

McDonald, who says she sleeps on chamois-like sheets made from bamboo fibres, considers the plant to be one of the most sustainable in the world.

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