

Bamboozled

By Susan Camp

A few weeks ago, I drove through the Yorktown battlefield and saw that a huge bamboo stand had been removed to reveal old gravestones and foundations. Whoever plowed through the acres of almost impenetrable bamboo has my admiration. Bamboo is one of the toughest invasive exotic plants to manage.

Over 1200 species of bamboo exist; most are native to temperate and tropical climates. Bamboos were introduced to the United States from China in the 19th century as ornamental plants and to produce cane fishing poles.

A Google search will reveal an almost infinite number of uses for bamboo, including construction, scaffolding, flooring and furniture, paper, clothing, musical instruments, flagpoles, fences, and weapons. Bamboo is used in cooking and Asian medicine. The diet of the giant and red pandas consists almost entirely of the young bamboo shoots and leaves.

Bamboo is a perennial member of the grass family. Some species of bamboo can grow to heights of 70 feet. Bamboo develops into dense stands that defy penetration or removal. Bamboo invasion is evident along the East Coast from Pennsylvania to Florida and as far west as Texas. Golden bamboo (*Phyllostachys aurea*) is a particularly resistant adversary.

Bamboo spreads by sending out tough, underground rhizomes that form a thick mat. Two types of bamboo occur: clumping and running forms. Clumping bamboo grows slowly and is easier to contain or manage. Running bamboo is aggressive and, if not controlled, will quickly engulf any flora in its way. Garden tools and ornaments, even potting sheds and greenhouses on old homestead sites are discovered when bamboo thickets are cut down. Eventually, the bamboo stand becomes a monoculture in which no other species can survive.

How can you prevent your property from being consumed by golden bamboo? Don't plant bamboo and ask your neighbors to refrain from planting it. If bamboo has escaped and is threatening to devour your garage, Google will yield millions of sites, some with remedies that are laughable, some that are downright dangerous. Never use gasoline, kerosene, or diesel fuel to destroy unwanted foliage. Household products like salt and vinegar sound innocuous, but they can alter the pH and chemical composition of the soil or affect water sources.

The two primary choices of removal are mechanical and chemical. Manual removal is hard work, and if the invaded area is large, you may have to hire a professional crew. For a small patch, cut the bamboo to the ground with a power saw and repeatedly mow the young shoots and leaves to deprive them of nutrients. After two or three years, the plants may die. One writer suggested harvesting and cooking the young shoots. I have read of cutting the plants to the ground and covering the area with a black tarp to block sunlight for 6 to 12 months.

If complete removal is neither feasible nor desirable, you can attempt to contain the bamboo by sinking a concrete, metal, or heavy plastic barrier two to three feet into the ground. Set at an angle, the barrier will deflect rhizomes back toward the thicket. If rhizomes emerge from the ground, they can be chopped off.

Products containing glyphosate are the only reliable herbicides that will destroy bamboo. Spraying is ineffective; the glyphosate must be poured directly onto the cut plants. If your bamboo stand is near a creek or stream, use only glyphosate products that are approved for that purpose. The bamboo won't succumb with a one-time application. It may take a year or two to get rid of the pesky plants. Always follow package instructions or notify Gloucester Master Gardeners at (804) 693-2602 for information on safe use of chemicals.

Table 4: "Herbicides for Invasive Plant Control" in Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 420-155 lists appropriate herbicides and Clemson University publication HGIC "Bamboo Control" offers basic information on chemical and mechanical maintenance and removal of bamboo.

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