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News Release

## About Bamboo

**Question:** We've lived in this house for several years and loved the property. Then about four years ago, new neighbors moved in next door. Apparently these folks wanted more privacy than was afforded by the shrubs that divide our lots, so they planted bamboo. At first it was great – it spread fast and created a definite screen. Then we realized the bamboo was moving into our yard, but by the time we really paid attention, it had established a strong root system that is creating problems. What can we do to keep the bamboo from taking over our yard the way it's moving in on theirs?

**Answer:** Ah, the quest for an “instant privacy fence” has lured many a homeowner to the fast-growing, relatively inexpensive, aesthetically pleasing use of bamboo. The next phase of growing bamboo is, in many cases, how to control its exuberant expansion. Before we get to that point, it may help to take a quick look at what bamboo is, other than a potential invader of our yards.

Bamboo, whose botanic names include *Bambusa*, *Arundinaria*, *Phyllostachys*, and *Fargesia*, is technically a grass, with some species topping out at 50+feet. Its woody stems or culms, divide into sections at obvious joints, or internodes. Bamboos spread by underground stems called rhizomes; the way these rhizomes grow is the difference between **running** and **clumping** bamboos. Your neighbor probably planted the running kind that is literally “running” into your lot.

While we may have a love/hate relationship with bamboo in our landscapes, our relationship with bamboo goes back many years. There are more than 1,000 species world-wide, growing in both tropical and temperate climates; there are even species native to Australia. Bamboo is characterized as ‘the world’s fastest growing plant,’ up to a foot a day in favorable circumstances. While those living in the southeast might offer Kudzu as a likely competitor for ‘the fastest growing,’ few will deny bamboo’s ability to reproduce quickly via those rhizomes.

Bamboo has been used for road building and bridge construction; for medicinal purposes such as kidney and bone diseases; to make clothes, to build houses, schools, and floors, to feed people and animals (think Panda bears and elephants); as well as for furniture, rugs, scaffolding, diapers, toys, musical instruments, and beer! So perhaps we should not disdain it as a plant, only that it should be used judiciously.

If you're considering planting bamboo, consider planting the clumping kind if you don't want to deal with containing it; clumping kinds don't "run" and grow much more slowly, making them a more manageable option. How to know if it's a running or clumping variety? Purchase from a knowledgeable store or grower, and make sure you ask for a clumping variety.

Faced with a stand of running bamboo, either in your landscape or moving from another property, there are several things you can do to control its advance. First, identify the part you want gone from the part you want to keep. You can do this by severing the rhizomes (basically modified root pruning) with a spade, mattock, or machine. And even though it's tempting, a stick of dynamite is not an option!

Cut the part you want gone all the way to the ground. Then encourage it to grow. This sounds counterproductive but the process of cutting and growing it back stresses and weakens the plant, and eventually starves the roots. Therefore when it grows back, cut it down again, repeating the process until the rhizome doesn't send up new shoots. You can also apply a non-selective herbicide such as glyphosate, the active ingredient in Roundup, Eraser, and others. Either way, continue the process, which may take a couple of years, until the bamboo gives up. Tilling or digging up every rhizome is another option, but that is a more labor-intensive operation and not very practical in most situations.

Bamboo has its ardent fans, and can be quite attractive in the right spot. Walk through the bamboo groves at Birmingham Botanical Garden or visit the Panda exhibit at a zoo to experience the positive side of this exotic looking grass. And if planting it in your yard, ensure your neighbors will remain "neighborly" by keeping it contained.

For more information about this topic please contact Sallie Lee, Urban Regional Extension Agent-Home Grounds, Gardens and Home Pests at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email [leesall@aces.edu](mailto:leesall@aces.edu).

