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How to Grow Ornamental Grasses

By **Michael J. McGroarty**

Ornamental grasses have become extremely popular in the past ten years or so, and if you buy

them at a garden center they are kind of pricey. Learning how to grow them yourself is actually quite easy. They can be grown from seed, but I won't pretend to be an expert at that for several reasons. One, I don't know anything about growing them from seed, and two, I have no desire to propagate them from seed because seedlings require too much care.

The easiest and most effective way to propagate them is through simple division. Of course you will need at least one parent plant of each variety that you would like to grow. If you shop around you might be able to find some 4" inch pots at a fair price.

One of each variety is good for a start. I find that the best time of the year to divide them is in the spring, just before the new growth emerges. If you buy the stock plants in the early spring, you might be able to divide them right away. If you buy them at any other time of the year, just plant them in your garden or other suitable location, knowing that you are going to dig them up in a few months, or a year or so.

When spring arrives you can divide them at any time as long as they are not well into putting on new growth. The earlier the better. To divide them simply dig up the root mass and start dividing it into pieces. The divisions do not have to be to be very large. It's difficult to describe, but as long as you have some roots, the new plant is likely to grow.

If you have small young plants you can probably just tear the root mass apart with your hands, but if the root mass is very big then you are going to need some tools. You might need some heavy duty tools!

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Last spring I divided several grass plants that had been in my landscape for a few years. When I dug out the root mass it was much larger and more dense than I expected. Using a very good digging spade and some real elbow power I was able to chop the root mass into quarters, and I replanted the quarters back into my landscape. That still left many clumps that I wanted to divide into very small plants that I could pot up in 2 quart containers. The root mass was too dense to tear apart with my hands, so I literally got a hammer and a 4" wide mason's chisel and chiseled off pieces. It worked and I now have a couple of hundred beautiful little grass plants in 2 quart containers.

Since then I have talked with a friend of mine who works for a large wholesale grower, and he told me that you never want to let an ornamental grass plant get that big if you intend to divide it. He said they plant small divisions in the field in the spring, and dig them up the following spring and divide them again. He assured me that if you get them just 12 months later, they can be easily torn apart by hand.

That sounds like a lot more fun than what I went through!

Michael J. McGroarty is the author of this article. Visit his most interesting website,

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How to Grow Bamboo

By Hans Dekker

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Bamboo is a mysterious and elusive plant that baffles taxonomists who try to contain it within a botanical class and gardeners who try to contain it within a limited garden space as they learn how to grow bamboo. For many years, bamboo was thought to be a primitive grass but recent DNA testing has shown it to be one of the most highly evolved forest grasses. There are over 1200 forms of bamboo that grow in a broad spectrum of color including the familiar green and gold as well as burgundy, blue and even black grasses. Some varieties of bamboo can grow up to a foot a day and ultimately reach 130 feet tall while the smallest bamboo cultivar attains only six inches of growth.

The first step in learning how to grow bamboo is picking a cultivar and beginning to unravel its many mysteries. While most of us picture tall stands of green and golden canes growing in tropical bamboo forests, bamboo cultivars range from the temperate to the tropical. As well as diversity in cultivar, bamboo has over 1500 documented uses that range from use in construction to the making of acupuncture needles and from agricultural fodder to the making of musical instruments. Until they are cut, bamboos stems are properly called culms and not canes. In India bamboo plants are commonly called the "Wood of the poor" and in China the "friend of the people". To add to the confusion, a cultivar commonly sold as "lucky bamboo" isn't bamboo at all but a type of lily from the Dracaena family!

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Unluckily for bamboo, it has the reputation for being an invasive plant, growing from running rhizomes. Although this is true for some cultivars, the most cold-hardy plants don't run at all, but grow from well-behaved clumps with well-established root systems. One thing that bamboo cultivars do have in common is that they are perennial plants. As noted above, some bamboos varieties are temperate and some are tropical. Because its diversity, it's easy to find a suitable cultivar when you want to learn how to grow bamboo. Bamboo cultivars range from those that grow indoors to outdoors, in a garden or in a container, in bright light or shade.

Two considerations in knowing how to grow bamboo successfully are water and air. All true bamboos are grasses and won't grow in saturated soils. They also need air circulation to thrive. In fact, some bamboo growers raise the pots of their small cultivars on chopsticks to provide air circulation under the plant as well as around it. Large pots are often elevated with heavy dowels.

The bamboo is a symbol of long life, strength and versatility for many cultures of the world. Unraveling its mysteries is a continuing source of enjoyment. When you know how to grow bamboo, you'll find that your love for the plant grows as fast as your bamboo does!

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