

## Grass towers

by [Kent Priestley](#) in Vol. 13 / Iss. 42 on 05/16/2007

The nursery's sign is a weathered slab of wood, bearing three Japanese characters. Translation: "Bamboo Moon." Appropriate, it would seem, for a business with the word "Haiku" in its name.

Nearly 30 years ago, Keiji Oshima left Japan for America, looking for a place where bamboo would grow well. He traveled to Hawaii, to California, and eventually "all over the United States." Research told him that the North Carolina mountains held promise in the form of moist soils and mild weather. He tried Arden, then Black Mountain. But fortune smiled brightest here, on a sloping 18-acre property six miles east of Hendersonville.

"I found it better here," Oshima says. "The weather, everything is better here."

Today, he grows 15 varieties of bamboo on six acres at his Haiku Bamboo Nursery. Some are giants with Jack and the Beanpole vigor, such as *Phyllostachys bambusoides* and *P. vivax* or "Chinese timber" bamboo. Another species, *P. nigra*, has stems or "culms" that look like they've been dipped in black enamel. Others are vertically challenged, such as *Sasa veitchii*, a low-grower that develops zippy white lines along its leaf margins in winter.

Corralling all this diversity into one place has taken years. Some of the varieties Oshima special-ordered; others, he's scavenged from roadside groves. "Some are diggings, you know," he says with a mischievous laugh. "I ask the owner first, of course."

Oshima runs the business with his wife, Stefani. The two met on neutral ground—in Kenya, in 1972. "We were both traveling," Stefani says. "Going together was the cheapest way we could get around. Understand, this wasn't too long after the hippie era."

The Oshimas raise bamboo in pots for mail-order nursery sales, sell bamboo poles as building material, and make crafts from the plant, including lamps, mirror frames, baskets and flutes. Haiku's warehouse, just off U.S. Highway 64, is filled with bamboo poles of various sizes, some "raw," others heat-cured with a glossy finish, courtesy of the plant's interior waxes. A selection of Keiji's crafts is also on display. Last year, the company launched a Web site, and sales have risen ever since. "It's getting better and better," says Stefani. "Soon we'll be busy as bees. Maybe we'll eventually need helpers, apprentices who are passionate about this plant as we are."

Poetry aside, commercial bamboo farming is no place for dreamers. While allowing that it's easy to keep bamboo alive, Keiji says it's "hard to grow," meaning it takes finesse to raise the plants to suit different purposes. Depending on its intended use, close-set or widely spaced nodes (the rings around the stem) may be called for. By selecting particular species, tinkering with the fertilizer regimen and harvesting at a particular age, a grower can raise bamboo to be exceedingly hard for building purposes, or more pliant for basket-making. The art is in the care.



**Culm to papa:** Haiku Bamboo nursery owner Keiji Oshima inspects last year's stems, or "culms." photo by Amy Rowling

“Crafters want to know what kind of bamboo, and how old is the bamboo?” Keiji says. “For them, it’s very important.” Much of the bamboo is harvested after four years’ growth; Oshima marks the stems with a Sharpie to indicate what year they first sought the light.

Bamboo’s chief virtue is also its greatest sin. In the wrong places or without proper attention, the plant has a well-deserved reputation for invasiveness, which few people in Western North Carolina could fail to notice. Pausing beside a shadowy grove of *P. nigra*, a so-called “running” species, Oshima gestures to one of the plant’s emergent shoots. It looks as if it could pierce plate steel. “I started with just one plant,” Oshima says. “And today, all of these ... .”

The plant also has a more enigmatic side. “It’s a mystery, you know,” Oshima says. “About every 100 years it makes a flower. And then it dies. If a bamboo grows in Japan, it flowers at a certain age and dies. If you grow that same plant here, it dies at the same time.”

The larger stems Oshima calls “mothers,” and the new shoots “babies.” Harvest time is still half a year away, when growth slows and the plants stop taking up water. “We cannot cut them now,” he says, “because the mother is taking care of the baby. If you cut the mother, the baby dies too.”

On this afternoon Oshima’s bamboo, mothers and babies alike, is getting some much-needed rain. Water dapples Oshima’s T-shirt as he inspects his crop. His eyeglasses are misted with rain. “Bamboo is beautiful,” he says, pausing between a pair of towering stems. “I love it.”

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Get bamboozled

For a virtual tour of Haiku Bamboo Nursery and a list of prices, visit [haikubamboonursery.com](http://haikubamboonursery.com). This August, the Oshimas will host the American Bamboo Society’s 1st annual Southeastern Chapter Bamboo Festival. The event will be held at the N.C. Arboretum on Aug. 11 and 12. Vendor opportunities are available. For more information, e-mail Stefani Oshima at [stefanioshima@hotmail.com](mailto:stefanioshima@hotmail.com) or call 685-3053.

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