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Fans launch WNC bamboo festival

By Arnold Wengrow
Citizen-Times Correspondent
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ASHEVILLE — Ask Stefani Oshima, of Haiku Bamboo nursery near Hendersonville, why people love bamboo, and she'll say it has mystery.

"When people walk in the groves, it's so peaceful. It's so quiet," she said. "It's so different from the regular forest; it's meditative."

Michele-Marie von Bergen agrees. "It's addicting," she said. "Of all the plants that are out there, once it bites you, it's got you."

The former Asheville resident grows 57 varieties of bamboo on her eight acres in Mountain City, Tenn. She quickly reels off a list of bamboo's attractions: "It's evergreen, it retains banks, it can be used for filtering wastewater, you can eat it, it's 17 percent harder than rock maple for floors, it can renew in five years, it produces more oxygen than trees do."

She lets her answer hang, as if to say, "Want to know more?" If you do, von Bergen, president of the American Bamboo Society Southeast Chapter, and other experts will answer your questions at the N.C. Arboretum on Saturday and Sunday at its first Bamboo Festival.

Experience the practical, aesthetic and perhaps spiritual personalities of this grass family member during the festival, which features talks on growing and using bamboo and demonstrations and sales of bamboo crafts and plants.

Not kudzu

But wait a minute. Isn't bamboo an invasive plant that will commandeer your yard and then colonize your neighbor's?

Not so, says von Bergen, and that's a notion she hopes the festival will dispel. "It's not the kudzu that swallowed the South," she said. She acknowledges some varieties, called "running bamboo," will travel. "But it takes a while," she said, "and cold weather inhibits the growth."

Oshima agrees that controlling bamboo is not difficult. Running "only happens for 60 days" in the summer, she said, "and the first 10 years you are not bothered; it does not spread until after that."

Fast-growing privacy

Oshima says most people start growing bamboo when they are looking for a fast-growing, evergreen privacy screen. That was true for Colin Post, an Asheville art restorer. He and his wife thought they had a pristine view when they bought their home in Barnardsville. "Then I saw my neighbor's tin roof," he said, "and I didn't like that."

After rejecting Leyland cypress and cedar because of their susceptibility to pests and relatively slow growth, he settled on bamboo for his privacy screen. “That’s when the obsession, the fascination started,” he said.

When the family moved to the Beaverdam area of Asheville to be closer to Post’s downtown studio, he brought specimens from his Barnardsville plants. He has increased his plantings to 25 varieties on about six acres.

“I like the tropical look it gives off. I like the variations,” he said, showing a visitor green, golden and black culms, as the jointed, hollow stems of bamboo are called.

He also pointed out an array of leaf shapes and colors, and noted that while some bamboos can grow 60-70 feet tall, others are shrubs. Some low-growing varieties are even used as groundcovers.

Besides enhancing his property’s privacy, bamboo appeals to Post’s artistic sensibility. A graduate of the Savannah College of Art, he envisions the design possibilities. “I’m going to selectively thin out pieces,” he said, indicating a stand of young plants near a rock pool, “so I have these culms that are coming up and you can see through them. You’re sculpting with it.”

Arnold Wengrow is an Asheville-based writer and a contributing editor of Theatre Design and Technology magazine.

To check it out

What: Bamboo Festival by the Southeast Chapter of the American Bamboo Society.

When: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and noon- 5 p.m. Sunday.

Where: N.C. Arboretum, off N.C. 191, south of Biltmore Square Mall.

Admission: Festival admission is free, but there is a parking fee of \$6.

Festival schedule:

- 10 a.m. Saturday: River cane lecture.
- 1 p.m. Saturday: Craft demonstration.
- 2 p.m. Saturday: Bamboo lecture.
- 1 p.m. Sunday: Cherokee river cane basket-making demonstration.
- 2 p.m. Sunday: Bamboo crop lecture.
- 3 p.m. Sunday: Music demonstration.

More information: www.sec-bamboo.org; www.ncarboretum.org; or 665-2492.

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