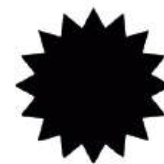


BAMBOO IN THE SPOTLIGHT:



Phyllostachys aurea

BY MARK SANDERS

In much of the U.S. you can visit online message boards, Facebook groups and Nextdoor postings and find a common question. What kind of bamboo is this?

More often than not, it is one species: *Phyllostachys aurea*, widely known as golden bamboo and alternatively called fishpole bamboo, monk's belly bamboo and fairyland bamboo.

The reason why so many people find this bamboo in their yards and ask its name has to do with its two most impressive qualities. Particularly its broad adaptability to a variety of climates, soil types and other growing conditions, and its aggressive spread via leptomorphic rhizomes.

This bamboo, which is both beloved by gardeners and – we should be honest – the cause of concern by homeowners, is likely the most ubiquitous bamboo growing in the U.S.

It also has a backstory that reaches into the earliest days of American bamboo collecting.

According to legend, it was introduced from China to Alabama in the 1880s. It is impossible to know exactly when and where *aurea* arrived, though that date and destination make sense. The 1880s marked the beginning of a Renaissance for foreign plant collecting. This was early in the plant collecting days of one of America's grandfathers of botany, David Fairchild, and the legendary plant collector and explorer Ernest Henry Wilson (credited for introducing more than 2,000 plants into Western gardens).



Phyllostachys aurea. Credit: flickr.com/art_es_anna

An influx of Chinese plants and Chinese culture more broadly were at hand, and *aurea* was just one of dozens, if not hundreds, of bamboos coming to American shores. *Phyllostachys* species were chief among genera arriving from the East, though many *Bambusas* and *Fargesias* were brought into the U.S. as well. Notably, Fairchild was the head of the Office of Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction, started in 1898.

Aurea spread, both figuratively and literally, from the South throughout the East coast. A plant used for privacy screening as well as a showpiece for gardeners interested in incorporating an Asian look with their landscape design, it also has many uses, from erosion control to handicrafts. The telltale swollen, "tortoise shell" type internodes at the base of the plant are particularly valued by furniture designers.

It also spreads easily and quickly. According to the guaduibamboo.com, it has a flowering cycle of 13 to 27 years (a figure debated among bamboo scholars), after which it does not experience the massive die-offs of many other bamboo species. It can produce upwards of 15,000 rhizomes in its lifetime and mature stands can send out rhizomes exceeding 20' in length annually. *Aurea* can achieve a height of 40', with culms that vary from bright green to rich yellow. According to a U.S. Department of Agriculture report, "A single golden bamboo clump can produce up to 9.3 miles (15 km) of stems in its lifetime."

Aurea's broad adaptability has not been welcomed by everyone. When left uncontrolled, it can become invasive. So much that it has been formally deemed an invasive weed in 10 countries spanning from Australia to Cuba.

Local and statewide lawmakers in the U.S. have become more assertive in recent years regarding bamboo bans. New York state has banned *aurea* and its close relative *Phyllostachys aureosulcata*. Text from the bill makes it "unlawful to knowingly possess with the intent to sell, import, purchase, transport or introduce" these bamboos. While the New York ban is the most expansive, it's not the only one of its type. Connecticut passed a similar bamboo ban, as have local governments along the east coast and California.

While *aurea*'s fate is debated among legislators, its usefulness in gardens – planted properly – should not be. It remains a resilient, stately bamboo that is both a symbol of America's fascination with Asian flora, and a wonderful addition to landscapes.



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