



# Bamboo

Bamboo is the common name for the Bambusoideae subfamily, which consists of approximately 1250 individual and diverse species of bamboo distributed in tropical and subtropical to mild temperate regions across the globe. Native species of bamboo are found across the globe, from Asia to Africa, the Americas, and Oceania, with the heaviest concentration of species found in East and Southeast Asia, as well as the islands of the Indian and Pacific oceans. China boasts the greatest diversity in species found in any one nation.



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## Cultivation + Distribution

A perennial grass plant, bamboo plants are characterized by their horizontal roots, hollow stems, and unique lifecycle where flowering happens anywhere between 20-120 years after it hits maturity, and death shortly after. Bamboo also holds the record as the fastest growing organism in the world, with some species recording more than 3 metres of growth in one day, though species range drastically in height, between 10-15 cm in the smallest species, to more than 40 metres in the tallest.

## Common Uses

### Food & Medicine

The cultivation history of bamboo varies widely depending on the species of interest, but some of the earliest recorded uses of bamboo date as far back as 7000 years ago in China. Today, the most economically valuable species is Moso bamboo (*Phyllostachy pubescens*), a tall, hardy species native to China.

Moso bamboo is cultivated mainly in China and Japan for its shoots, which are an important ingredient in many Asian cuisines, but also in North America and Europe as an ornamental plant. Bamboos offer a multitude of other uses aside from just food and decoration though. Sap extracted from the leaves of bamboo is used as an additive in products such as beer, shampoo, and toothpaste, and in one region of Tanzania, people make a beer out of a bamboo species native to the area. Bamboo is also a sustainable building material as it grows quickly and is both flexible and lightweight while also having a high weight tolerance; and the hollow culms of bamboos are used in all sorts of craftwork items, from carvings, to umbrellas, instruments, and also stripped into slivers for weaving.



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## Cultural Significance

Bamboo is a very common motif in traditional Chinese painting, appearing both alone or alongside pine and plum. The “Three Friends of Winter” as they’re collectively referred to, are associated with the qualities of steadfastness, perseverance, and resilience due to their ability to thrive even in the harshness of winter. Bamboo is also associated with wealth and prosperity due to its fast growing nature, with many Chinese households keeping an ornamental plant referred to as “lucky bamboo” for good feng shui (even though the plant itself, *Dracaena sanderiana*, is not actually a species of bamboo!), and in the Chinese language, where simple words are often used as building blocks to create more complex words, the character for bamboo (竹) is often found in other building and construction related words, a reflection of the importance of bamboo as a construction material in Ancient China. And of course, bamboo is the primary food source of China’s most iconic wildlife species, the Giant Panda.



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