

Fargesia for 2015!

With the New Year come those New Year resolutions. One resolution I hope many Gardeners will consider is expanding their design palette into new or little used genres of plants. Bamboo is one of those plant groups that often instill fear and disdain amongst the gardening world. However, not all Bamboos are aggressive and one very garden worthy bamboo is still much overlooked – the genus *Fargesia*!

Like all Bamboos, *Fargesia* is a member of the Poaceae or Grass Family. This genus name was scribed in 1893 by Adrien René Franchet (1834-1900) of the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle in Paris, honoring the French missionary, plant collector and botanist Paul Guillaume Farges (1844-1912). Farges discovered the genus during his rather lengthy stay in China from 1867-1912, during which he collected over 4,000 species of plants. Among bamboos hardy to NJ, what is unique to the genus *Fargesia* is the refined manners by which it conducts itself in a garden! *Fargesia* is a pachymorph bamboo, meaning that it is clump forming, as compared to a leptomorph, which is a spreading bamboo. In leptomorphs, both the rhizome (the underground and horizontally growing stem) and the culm (the vertically growing stem or shoot) have alternating hollow internode and solid, ring-like nodes, with the internodal regions of the rhizome several inches in length. In pachymorphs, the internode segments of the rhizomes are often solid and are, comparatively, very tightly spaced. This variation in internode lengths allows leptomorphs to spread upwards of 12 feet or greater in a season, while pachymorphs clumps increase by a mere 1-2 inches! The nodes in the rhizomes are also the site of root and culm development while in the culms or shoots, the nodes are the site of bud formation for branch and leaf production. Interestingly and with a few exceptions, when the culms initially emerge from the ground, they have already reached their ultimate girth and never get any larger in diameter as the culm shoots skywards or in the years to come. At emergence, the culms also appear as a ‘spear’ of overlapping leaf sheaths. These leaves are connected to the culm at the nodes. Leaf sheaths provide protection during culm elongation as the emerging and elongating culm is structurally rather weak and is easily damaged. The leaf sheaths are often quite ornamental and slowly drop from the culm once each internode’s elongation is complete.

Clearly, bamboo morphology can be a bit confusing! Regardless, *Fargesia* has upwards of 80 attractive species with numerous entertaining facts for the gardener.

Fargesia is typically found in high, mountainous elevations, often growing in coniferous forests from China South to the Himalayas. It is also the preferred food for the Panda Bear! Typical to many bamboos, the flowering period is often delayed by upwards of 120 years, but once it flowers and sets copious amounts of seed, the plants die. In fact, the flowering of *Fargesia nitida* during the 1990’s resulted in



a subsequent crash in the Panda Bear population. *Fargesia* species typically form ‘fountain-like’ mounds of foliage (above right), as the slender canes arch over and down under the weight of the foliage. Since it is an uplands understory plant, *Fargesia* prefers afternoon shade as the leaves will curl in hot sun and plants will not thrive in regions where evening summer temperatures remain above 70. To the delight of most gardeners, this genus is also evergreen, zone 5-6 winter hardy, drought tolerant once established AND, they are deer resistant!

Fargesia nitida, the Blue Fountain Bamboo is a wonderful garden plant for the shade. *Nitida* is Latin for shining and the epithet was chosen by the British diplomat and botanist, Algernon Bertram Freeman-Mitford (1837-1916) for the shiny, dark purple appearance of the internodes. The slender culms arch down under the weight of the foliage, generating both the fountain-like appearance and the common name! Interestingly, the first year culms do not produce leaves and stand upright throughout the first season. At maturity, the arching culms reach nearly 10’ tall and slightly wider.

Fargesia dracocephala ‘Rufa’ provides yet another great Garden addition. Similar in size to the above, the ‘dragon head-like’ leaf sheaths drop to reveal attractive rufous or red culms that are particularly attractive in June into July. It is also more tolerant of sun and the selection Green Panda™, (Pictured on the right) which was first introduced from the Chinese province of Gansu in 1995, has both improved vigor and a more attractive leaf presentation.



Based upon the approximately two acres of the leptomorph bamboo, *Phyllostachys nuda* at Rutgers

Gardens, bamboo can spread to occupy areas much too large for the typical home garden. It is unfortunate that most gardeners believe that this ability to seemingly devour garden space applies to all bamboo. Hopefully, *Fargesia* will be included as one of your New Year’s Garden resolutions for 2015!