

Heavenly bamboo - *Nandina domestica*

Shrub Profile

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Nandina domestica



'Atropurpurea Nana'

The heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica*) and its many cultivars are a staple of the Southern garden.

One can easily imagine why heavenly bamboo is so popular. This plant is tough as nails, tolerating sun, shade, and most soils. The broadleaf evergreen foliage is unique and fine textured, the flowers and fruits are impressive, and the winter color can be spectacular.

Heavenly bamboo is a broadleaf evergreen. The leaves, which are bi- or tri-pinnately compound, give the plant a very fine textured appearance. During the growing season the foliage is a medium green, but once winter sets in, the foliage turns a deep maroon on the species. Winter color on several of the cultivars is downright amazing. Some have clear red foliage like a black gum tree, while others have vibrant chameleon colors. It's important to know the winter color, since you can make the wrong statement in your garden if you are not careful. If used in the wrong spot or too frequently, your garden can look like the landing strip at an airport.

The flowers can be fairly significant. The small cream-white flowers appear in late May and early June in large (15" long) terminal panicles. The delicate flowers are a nice compliment to the soft textured foliage.

Starting in October, the pea-sized fruits begin to take on color. At their peak, the fruits are a bright lipstick red that persist through the entire winter. Sometimes the impact of the fruit is diminished if the foliage color is also tinged maroon. The evergreen foliage and spectacular fruits lend themselves to all kinds of holiday arrangements.

Plant habit on the species is a delicate, upright oval. The term "bamboo" in the common name aptly describes the unique stems that look like bamboo shoots up close. You can take advantage of this element if you are designing an Oriental garden. As the plant matures, lower foliage gets sparse, so foliage and fruits tend to appear in tufts at the tops of these long "bamboo" shoots. This plant clearly benefits from regular renewal pruning, which simply involves removing the larger "bamboo canes" at the ground.



This is one plant with lots of plant habit options through cultivars. Today, these many cultivars far outsell the species.

One of the older cultivars is ‘Atropurpurea Nana.’ This is a very tight globe (2’ x 2’), featuring foliage that is yellow-green tipped with red during the growing season, turning deep red in the winter. Flowers and fruits would be rare on this cultivar. ‘Atropurpurea Nana’ goes through an unusual color change in the spring when the foliage is transitioning from intense red to lime-green. ‘Wood’s Dwarf’ is in the same class as ‘Atropurpurea Nana.’



‘Harbour Dwarf’, while similar to the previous two, is much finer textured than these. Because ‘Harbour Dwarf’ suckers more, it lends itself better to median strips where you need a low, evergreen ground cover. While fruits will appear less frequently on this cultivar, they will appear in small numbers as the plant matures.

Several other fine cultivars include ‘Firepower,’ Gulf Stream™, Moon Bay™, and Plum Passion™.

‘Firepower’ is a dwarf selection from New Zealand noted for its lime green leaves and superior red winter color (hence name ‘Firepower’). Plant geeks should consider purchasing ‘Chirimen’ (N. d. filamentosa ‘Chirimen’). Foliage is threadlike and almost looks as though grasshoppers chewed all but the main veins—a

very unusual form.

Nandina is a tough-as-nails plant that will grow in full shade to hot, dry sun. These plants require very little water once established. Because *Nandina* is so tolerant, it should come as no surprise that the species, which does flower and fruit regularly, is getting significant attention in the South as a potentially invasive plant.

Common Name: heavenly bamboo

Varieties to look for: ‘Harbour Dwarf,’ Gulf Stream™, Moon Bay™

Flower Color: cream-white

Blooming period: summer

Perennial or annual: woody shrub

Size: 7’ tall x 3’ wide (species)

Exposure: sun or shade

Soil: tolerant

Watering: moist best

When to prune: spring

Suggested use: specimen, mass, Oriental garden, pools

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