

Excavators, trenches and bonfires: Montgomery County's bamboo wars

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Mike Honig's neighborhood association in North Potomac has gathered funds and organized homeowners to battle an ever-expanding growth of invasive running bamboo. (Courtesy of Mike Honig)

The years-long 'backbreaking' battle to beat back invasive running bamboo

About 15 years ago, a neighbor planted bamboo next to David Roots' yard in the Ashton neighborhood near Olney.

"He said, 'Don't worry, it's not invasive,'" Roots said.

Except that it was.

Roots spends day after day ripping baby bamboo shoots out of his garden. "When my daughter gets this house, it will be her fight," he said.

Roots says he fears the persistent plant will find its way into his septic system.

"I hate bamboo," he said.

For decades, Montgomery County residents have been waging battles in what some call “the bamboo wars.” You can find the non-native plant spreading under backyard fences but also across county farms, roadways and parks.

Bamboo has become so bothersome that in recent years the County Council and the state legislature have tried to regulate the thicket.

Blame the bamboo

No one’s sure how the problem started.

It’s likely that bamboo was first planted by homeowners as a way to build a thick boundary dividing their property from their neighbors’, said Ryan Colliton, vegetation ecologist in the Park Planning and Stewardship division of Montgomery County Parks.



Bamboo growth that has been remediated and contained by a thick plastic barrier dug into the ground. (University of Maryland Extension)

The sowers may not have realized what they — and their neighbors — would reap.

“I felt naive,” said Sien Vernyns, who bought her Rockville home with a wall of bamboo framing the backyard. “I loved it at first. It was like my whole yard was my own personal oasis.”

But, when her basement began to flood, a contractor told her the culprit was bamboo roots. They’d found their way into small cracks in the foundation of her home and expanded them. Getting rid of the bamboo would end up costing her tens of thousands of dollars.

Jon Traunfeld bought his house in the 1990s with bamboo in the back and didn’t have a clue how it got there. While he has worked to contain it to his own yard, Traunfeld also educates Marylanders on battling bamboo for a living as the director of the Home and Garden Information Center at the University of Maryland Extension, an educational outreach initiative run out of the College of Agriculture.

Underneath the 30-foot-long stems that tower over the roof of his home is an intricate system of underground stems — which are different than roots — called rhizomes.

In a type of plant known as “running bamboo,” rhizomes grow horizontally several feet beneath the soil from the stems of bamboo stalks and seed new stalks.

It’s exactly the pattern that Kim Smaczniak encountered in her backyard near Dale Drive Neighborhood Park, along Sligo Creek, when she decided to take on a seemingly impenetrable clump of running bamboo.



A comparison to show the growth stages of bamboo, from a rhizome at top to younger shoots, below, and older shoots, center. (University of Maryland Extension)

Plans of attack

Mowing baby sprouts of bamboo seemed to work for five years, until the shoots spread across Smaczniak's neighbors' property and sprouted through fissures in her patio's concrete.

After "the easy part" of chainsawing the stems, she dug two massive trenches framing the bamboo and found remnants of past homeowners' attempts to contain its spread: shards of thick plastic, metal slabs and disjointed chunks of concrete.

"I was constantly discovering some mystery from all the previous owners trying to control the bamboo," she said. "All evidence that it failed."

After a three-year, "backbreaking" battle, "I would not buy a property with bamboo," Smaczniak said.

Todd Montgomery of Silver Spring said he applied his large mechanical saw — which cuts with spinning razors — to break into underground bamboo stems and build a barrier to contain the bamboo's spread.



When Todd Montgomery started the process of clearing bamboo from his Silver Spring backyard, he sawed back the stalks of the bamboo that towered over his home. (Courtesy of Todd Montgomery)



Montgomery used an all saw, pictured here, to cut through the root system of the bamboo in his backyard. (Courtesy of Todd Montgomery)

Montgomery said the power tool, commonly used to cut through metal, required several minutes to break through the system of stems.

Other homeowners, including Ken Allen of Takoma Park and Chuck Woolery of Rockville, have chosen to cut the stems of running bamboo down to the soil and spray them with vinegar concentrate or an herbicide over the course of several years.

“It’s my fitness program,” said Woolery, who’s helped his neighbors rid their yards of bamboo invasion.

“Using a staff of bamboo instead of a pipe makes for a good shoulder exercise,” Woolery said.

He’s repurposed the bamboo stalks, which he says are five times stronger than oak, into trimming for the walls of his living room and into 50 feet of deer fencing in Aspen Hill, the local park.

Call for help

Many property owners give up on the battle, handing off the fight to expert landscapers.

Fidel Alfaro, owner of Alfaro’s Tree Expert, says for 20 years he’s had one or two bamboo remediation jobs across Montgomery County and parts of Virginia each month. Although it depends on the size and scale of the invasion, Alfaro said bamboo work is by far the hardest job in landscaping.

His team uses a backhoe loader with a special attachment to excavate several feet of soil from a lawn, followed by hand-sifting the soil to make sure no stray rhizome has been left behind. Then the entire lawn is replanted.

“If someone is asking \$2,000 for this kind of job, they don’t know what they’re getting into,” Alfaro said.

Bamboo removal can easily cost twice as much, he said.

“It’s a burden left to the community when we don’t have rules about plants that cause this much damage,” Langley Park bamboo champion Smaczniak said.

There oughta be a law?

It’s why Montgomery County Councilman Evan Glass introduced the Native Plant Protection Act. The legislation would ban the sale and production of running bamboo, while requiring 50% of plants in new developments to be native species.

“Bamboo takes over everything in its path,” Glass said. “Our whole ecosystem, our birds, bees and animals rely on native plants, and we want to make sure we are supporting our natural environment.”

State lawmakers have also grappled with the problem.

Linda Foley, a state delegate who represents District 15, is fighting a personal invasive plant battle with English ivy. However, she has heard from many constituents about their frustrations with bamboo. In 2023, she introduced a bill — now a law — that gave counties the right to ban or manage the sale and planting of bamboo.

“I was shocked that even till today people say, ‘oh, you’re the bamboo lady,’” Foley said.

She expects invasive running bamboo to be prohibited in another piece of legislation that will take effect this year, the 2024 Biodiversity and Agriculture Protection Act.

Others who have battled bamboo have decided to think about it differently.



Instead of fighting the growth of bamboo on her property at Soleado Lavender Farm, Sophia Watkins had her husband build a deck in a clearing and uses the plants to provide a mindful space for yoga. (Courtesy of Sophia Watkins)

“Our situation with bamboo is a little different,” said Sophia Watkins, the current owner of Soleado Lavender Farm, one of the oldest organic farms in the county that has been in her family for generations.

It was Watkins’ grandmother, a foreign plant enthusiast, who first planted bamboo on a portion of the farm. It now covers several acres.

Watkins — after months of digging up soil and stems, burning the shoots in bonfires and building vertical barriers — gave up.

With a wooded deck built in a clearing in the center of the bamboo forest, the bamboo now shelters a space for yoga and mindfulness.

“If you can’t beat it, make it beautiful,” she said.

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