A Fresh Look at Nandina (Heavenly Bamboo)

by Nancy Hawkins, UC Master Gardener

Do you have a blank spot in your garden needing filling? Do you need a plant that looks good year-round, is water-wise, and easy to care for? My go-to shrub that fulfills these needs is *Nandina domestica*, often referred to simply as Nandina or as Heavenly Bamboo. It has been used in Central Valley gardens for many years. We need to relook at the advantages of this water-wise, hardy shrub with lacy, pale green foliage. Let’s start by adding versatility to its list of virtues: nandina is attractive as a single plant, a hedge, a decorative covering for a fence or wall, and can even be used as a ground cover.

*Nandina domestica* is native to Japan, China, and India, and despite its common name, is not a bamboo at all. It is an evergreen shrub which grows 3 to 9 feet tall and 3 to 5 feet wide. In late spring, nandina produces clusters of dainty white flowers that become sprays of colorful red berries in fall and winter. Lacy leaves arise from unbranched or sparsely branched bamboo-like stems in a delicate pattern. It is particularly attractive when contrasted with darker foliage plants or shown off in front of a fence or wall.

It provides visual interest in each season: new bronze-copper leaves in spring, sprays of white flowers in summer, reddish leaves in fall, and red berries in winter. Its tidy growth habit makes it useful in small spaces like a courtyard, entry way, or patio. It grows well in containers in sun or partial shade.

Modestly slow growing, nandina reliably keeps its shape, tending to need little care or pruning. Each shrub produces one to several small diameter trunks growing 6 or more feet. Foliage starts at the bottom and works its way up the trunk, but flower clusters only form on new top growth. An annual spring pruning of one or more trunks at the ground level encourages new shoots and foliage at the lower levels. It is desirable to keep lacy foliage growing all along the trunks from bottom to top.

Unfortunately, many gardeners disfigure the natural graceful shape of an individual nandina shrub by pruning them incorrectly. Commonly, bushes are sheared into square or oblong shapes and all the lower foliage is pruned off the bottom of the trunks. The poor shrub loses its identity and now resembles a near naked plant only sparsely clad in greenery and standing on stork legs.

If you need a shorter plant there are several dwarf cultivars that grow less than 5 feet tall:

- ‘Compacta’ (4 to 5 feet) has very lacy leaves and intense fall color;
- ‘Gulf Stream’ (3½ feet) has blue-green summer foliage and red winter color;
- ‘Moon Bay’ (3 feet) has lime green summer foliage and does not flower or form berries;
• ‘Fire Power’ (2 feet) has red tinged summer foliage that turns bright red in winter. All blend well with other evergreen shrubs and perennials in a planting bed or as a hedge bordering a walkway. Dwarf cultivars need very little pruning or special care.

Nandina tolerates a wide temperature range (from -10 to 100+ degrees F), grows slowly, uses low to moderate amounts of water, is rabbit and deer resistant, and is considered a low care, water-wise plant. It tolerates a wide variety of soils but prefers moist, fertile, slightly acidic soil. It will grow in full sun to part shade, and can tolerate heavy shade, but will have brighter colors in full sun. It has no serious insect or disease problems but it is occasionally bothered by scale and mites. If the shrub is grown in partial to full shade where the foliage remains wet, it may be prone to leaf spot diseases.

Branches of nandina-are popular for Japanese flower arrangements and are used as a filler in bouquets of all kinds. Pruning can be done in the winter to bring sprays of its red berries indoors.

Considering how adaptable, hardy, and attractive nandina is in the home garden, we need to reconsider this old standby and use it more. It’s not the showy focal point; instead it works rather quietly in its own way, adding grace and year-round lacy greenery. I’m particularly fond of its ability to blend in nicely with other shrubs and perennials, its low maintenance, and year-round color. It is the perfect addition to any yard!

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