

The Much-Maligned Nandina

-- by Hoyt Bangs

Nandina domestica

Nandina or Heavenly Bamboo

Broadleaf evergreen zones 6 to 9

Height to seven feet and three foot spread

A multitude of drought tolerant varieties



There is an oft repeated line that “the only survivors of a nuclear holocaust will be the cockroaches and Cher.” You might want to add the omnipresent Nandina to that list.

There are few plants that have been so vilified and praised as *Nandina domestica*.

For those that know and appreciate her, this shrub is also called Heavenly Bamboo. How can a name be so at odds with itself? Bamboo is more likely to be associated with the opposite of heaven. Possibly it is so named because Nandina is not actually in the bamboo family; yet, it has a similar appearance to bamboo.

My first introduction to Nandina was shortly after purchasing my first home. I had never gardened before and I was ready to create my own little oasis. A neighbor stopped by to offer his expertise in plant identification after having spotted me cutting trees on my property he considered valuable. Walking around the yard, I was struck by how one plant seemed to dominate the landscape. Joe, my neighbor, smiled broadly and stated that those plants were “the much maligned nandina.” He went on to tell me that *Southern Living Magazine* had used that moniker as the title of a recent article. He also said he felt the title was tongue in cheek because he considered it a terrific plant. “The reason it gets such bad play is that most people don’t know how to prune it” he told me. After retrieving a suitable pruning tool, he proceeded to show me the proper way to shape a nandina.

Through the years my appreciation for this plant expanded with each new season. With a minimal amount of care, it thrives in shade or sun. It can grow tall and leggy in shade and with minimal pruning transform itself into a living sculpture. It is great against the backdrop of a wall or fence. In full sun it can be used as a hedge anywhere from two (use a dwarf species for shorter height) to seven feet in height.

The Nandina is evergreen and populates zones 6 to 9. Nandina has white flowers in the spring and berries galore in the fall for many birds’ species and plenty left for holiday decorations. A native to China and Japan, it is a mainstay in an oriental garden. It also displays flashy fall and winter color, and can colonize by suckers or seed. The Nandina’s flowers as described by Michael Dirr in *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants* “are not overwhelming but are refreshingly elegant as they stand and arch ever so slightly, framed by the elegant foliage.”

J.C. Raulston, in his book *The Year in Trees, Superb Woody Plants for Four-Season Gardens*, states that “Nandina is the embodiment of quiet grace in the garden, and as important is its ability to thrive under almost any landscape condition.” Raulston also says, “The species can create some of the loveliest plantings of heavenly bamboo to be found in the landscape, but the numerous excellent cultivars available are all consistent performers in terms of their own unique landscape traits.”

The Nandina cultivars are numerous. Dwarfs like the popular ‘Firepower’, the thread leaf



foliage of ‘San Gabriel’, ‘Harbour Dwarf’ with its tight mounded habit and true to form characteristics as well as ‘Moon Bay’ are just a few of the stars in this large regal family. ‘Royal Princess’ is a large (6-8’ tall) fine textured beauty and couples well with other top performers like ‘Plum Passion’, ‘Gulfstream’ and ‘Alba’.

This is one plant that thrives anyplace in the landscape. Match the species to any microclimate and chances are it will succeed with little prodding. Pruning involves cutting back leggy canes to staggered heights just above the ground sometime around Christmas (for decorations), and until the new growth emerges in March. Heavy pruning will result in a low, compact, attractive shrub.

Having touted Nandina as my signature plant, I felt vindicated when I heard that Steve Bender, Senior Garden Editor of *Southern Living Magazine*, had proclaimed Nandina domestica to be “The Plant of the New Century” in the magazine’s 2001 Garden Annual. Once maligned and the object of derision, the Nandina is now acclaimed and touted as one of the most useful plants employed in garden design. Propagated from seed, cuttings and tissue culture, many species are grown by North Carolina nurseries.

A plant that looks good all year round in all locations, and like Cher and the roaches, commands your attention. Professionals agree it will be one of the “most consistent performers” and “elegant additions” you will make to your garden.