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Much more than hardwood floors

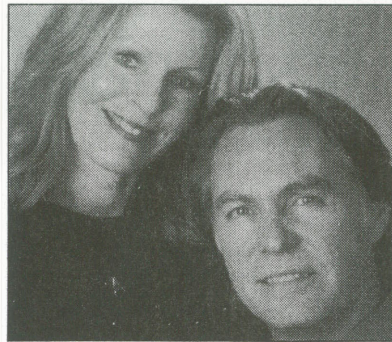
▼ *Teragren finds a new niche for bamboo: snowboards and skateboards.*

By **CHAD SCHUSTER**
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They cling in clusters to the Chinese hillsides, displaying wispy plumage atop segmented stocks that look like giant, flexible drinking straws.

Indeed, it is the flexibility and durability of the Moso bamboo tree that, along with growth spurts that would shame even the gangliest of teens, has led to its rising popularity in the flooring, paneling and veneering industries.

Islanders David and Ann Knight of Teragren LLC, makers of an array of



Ann and David Knight

bamboo products, were pioneers in a field that's constantly sprouting new competitors and innovative uses for the much-misunderstood plant.

"We were one of the first in the U.S. market," said Ann Knight of Teragren, which was founded by fellow islander Steen Ostenson as TimberGrass LLC in 1994. "Today there are literally hundreds of competitors, but we've maintained our position as an industry leader."

The Knights were medical consultants before they joined TimberGrass in

1998. The couple changed the name to Teragren in 2003 after Ostenson left the company.

Like most everyone else, they knew little about bamboo, but learned quickly that the wood is not only versatile and economical, but also environmentally friendly.

The next challenge was getting others to realize it. The Knights spent much of Teragren's infancy educating both builders and consumers.

"Any time you introduce something new and different, people are going to be suspicious," Knight said. "People think of bamboo and they think of these big round shoots together to make floors."

But while the mention of bamboo may conjure up Gilligan-ian imagery for some, the actual process, Knight said, is different than people think.

Moso bamboo grows up to 80 feet tall in the mountains of China and can be harvested

every five and a half or six years; traditional hardwood trees can take 120 years to reach the same height.

Additionally, because bamboo is actually part of the grass family, it grows back after it's cut down.

"One of the reasons we saw such a good future in bamboo was because there's tons of it," Knight said. "It's great because it

renews itself very rapidly and it's durable."

Knight said Moso bamboo is 25 percent harder than oak.

The harvested wood is split, flattened and pressurized with a special adhesive, which contains almost no formaldehyde, into panels that are available in several grains and colors.

Teragren products can be found in homes and businesses across North America, including the floors and service desks at the main Seattle Public Library.

They are certified by the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design rating system, a voluntary, consensus-based national standard for sustainable building.

Bamboo flooring costs are comparable to hardwood and range from \$9 to \$11 per square foot, including installation.

Teragren has headquarters on Miller Road and two distribution centers, one in Auburn, the other in Indianapolis.

The company works with factory groups in China and Malaysia.

Knight said bamboo products are gaining popularity across the country, particularly in California and in the Northeast.

Arborsports, a California-based snowboard and skateboard

manufacturer, recently began incorporating Teragren veneers into some of its products.

"We're committed to using environmentally friendly materials to build our snowboards," said owner Bob Carlson. "The bamboo offers more durability and better performance. We're going to continue to make it a part of what we do here."

Expansion and innovation, including a new type of flooring that is 43 percent harder than its standard bamboo flooring, have Teragren thriving.

The company also has benefitted from the continuing trend toward green building.

Seven billion dollars were spent on green building products and services in 2004, 37 percent more than the prior year, according to the U.S. Green Building Council.

Knight said Teragren doubled its revenue nearly every year until 2003, when a growing number of competitors finally watered down the market.

While competition in the marketplace is generally regarded as healthy, Knight warns that, because there is no grading system for bamboo products, the indiscriminate bamboo buyer could be bamboozled.

Knight said the distinction between importers and manufacturers is an important one.

Importers, she said, often buy from whichever manufacturer has the cheapest price at the time.

Because Teragren manufactures its own products, Knight said, the company can guarantee consistency and quality over time.

The Knights' rise to the top of the bamboo industry, on the other hand, was not so easily foreseen.

"We saw a potential boom for environmental products and knew it was something we wanted to be involved with, both philosophically and as a business," Knight said. "But I never gave much thought to how big we might get."

"When you're doing something you're passionate about, those things tend to take care of themselves."

