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Bamboo: The Eco-Friendly Alternative

These days, consumers want the best, and they don't want to feel guilty about it. Products have to look good, taste good and smell good, and getting them shouldn't mean destroying the planet.

So bamboo, what took you so long?

Bamboo products were initially known for their natural, earthy appeal, but now they have secured a spot in the mainstream market. Trend watchers say this is far more than a passing fad. For many reasons, bamboo is here to stay.

The plant that grows like a weed has long been cultivated for its sleek, stylish flooring, especially in Europe. Now, it is recognized as a quality product for furniture, countertops and walls, not only by the environmentally conscious but by mainstreamers who like its strength and urban contemporary look.

Bamboo also gets points among eco-conscious consumers because it is so renewable. As one of the world's fastest-growing plants, bamboo is able to reach maturity in about four years, compared to the typical 25-70 years for commercial tree species in the United States.

Even better, bamboo can grow pesticide-free, which means less chemical pollution.

Because bamboo is abundant, versatile and inexpensive to manufacture, it is being used to make items such as paper and kitchen accessories to sheets, towels and clothing. There are bamboo rugs, bamboo shampoo, bamboo skin-care products — even bamboo caskets.

Vicki Kunkel, a Chicago-based brand strategist, said in our fact-paced, hyper-stressed society, bamboo gives rooms a warmer, more peaceful feel that provides a counterbalance to computers, big-screen televisions and the techno-gadget takeover.

"It's just really expanding into all areas of life," Kunkel said. "There are actually specialty shops that put together bamboo arrangements for wedding bouquets — one is supposed to represent health, one is for happiness and so on."

But even the most eco-friendly product won't sell if it isn't good quality or is too expensive.

"We are concerned about the environment, but unfortunately, we're only concerned to a point," said Kunkel, whose company, Leader Brand Strategists, helps companies establish brands in alignment with current trends. "If it's not comfortable, if it's not durable and long-lasting, we're not going to use it."

Bamboo passes those tests, hands-down, said Bobette Stott, a Los Angeles-based clothing designer who also manufactures bamboo at Stott Innovative DesignWorks. Stott says that as China continues to boom with exports, so will bamboo, which is one of China's oldest and largest commodities.

"With the marriage of our demand for environmentally friendly products and their push as a global leader in the world supply chain — the timing couldn't be better," Stott said. "As the trend continues to trickle down, I believe you will see more and more bamboo products at all price points, unlike organics, as the fiber can be manufactured in a variety of ways, to suit a multitude of consumer price demands."

Some home builders have replaced conventional timber with bamboo for roofs, staircases and walls simply because it is so durable. Depending on the species (there are about 1,500 of them), bamboo is stronger than most other hardwoods. The typically blond wood now also comes in darker tones, giving consumers more choices.

Homeowners, too, are following commercial spas by using bamboo to create a serene, exotic feel in their bathrooms. Bamboo can also brighten a kitchen and give living areas a clean, relaxed feel.

And here's a new twist on the knotty plant: Manufacturers are using bamboo in textiles, where its natural antimicrobial properties have replaced harmful chemicals used in sports and active wear to keep bacteria and odors to a minimum.

Stores sell bamboo-blend items, such as sheets and towels. Bamboo is softer than cotton, drapes like silk and is great for allergies because it is naturally hypoallergenic, said Robin Wilson, a lifestyle efficiency consultant on home products. They are also affordable.

Bamboo towels are extremely absorbent, dry quickly and have cashmere-like softness, Wilson said.

The plant is still a difficult fiber to control in soft goods, so most cloth products are blended with cotton. But as technology improves, industry leaders expect that to change.

Kunkel said she felt her neighbor's bamboo-blend sheets and found them softer than Egyptian cotton.

Bamboo has been endorsed by such "green" organizations as Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability, which use their eco-friendly values to drive purchasing behavior.

These consumers put \$230 billion into the economy each year and are largely responsible for the environmentally friendly products and services seen in the marketplace, said Colette Chandler, president of The Marketing Insider and an expert on consumer health and environmental trends.

"As companies realize the existence of this consumer and see that they have to do their part to be environmentally responsible, they start producing more environmentally friendly products using resources such as bamboo," Chandler said.

Products you wouldn't expect from bamboo are also emerging. The stems, leaves and sticky extract from inside the cane have been found to be rich in amino acids, vitamins, minerals and starches. Bamboo also features natural strengthening, revitalizing, exfoliating and deodorizing benefits.

An ingredient in bamboo serves as a natural source of silicone, which improves the slip and aesthetics of cosmetics. And bamboo is becoming a popular ingredient in hair and skin care products because it is strong yet flexible, making it great for hair styling products.

To understand bamboo's big boom, just take a look back. Bamboo has historically been used in Tibetan medicines for such ailments as arthritis, as well as in food. Bamboo vinegar oil is used as an organic fertilizer, a preservative medium and for relief of pains, Chandler said.

Long associated with Eastern societies, bamboo is a natural choice for yoga-style environments. That desire for the serene and spiritual has spread westward, prompting more U.S. consumers to seek the same.

Some perfumes get their woody smell from bamboo. China even manufactures a bamboo beer.

Trend watchers say that when nationwide chains, such as Target stores, take on a product, it typically means the product is here to stay.

"Throughout society, there are peaks and valleys, and society goes through changes," Kunkel said. "But we can feel good about this product."

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Image: This wide-plan floor comes in vertical or flat grains with natural or caramelized coloring. The tabletop is bamboo parquet butcher block. Both items are made by **Teragren**, a bamboo product manufacturer. (Photo by Teragren Fine Bamboo Flooring, Panels & Veneer, www.teragren.com).

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Where to Buy Bamboo Products:

- Linens N' Things. Sells bamboo/cotton-blend sheets.
- Target Stores. Some stores sell a bamboo/cotton-blend sheet. Target also sells bamboo furniture and other bamboo items.
- Bed Bath & Beyond. Sells a bamboo/cotton/polyester-blend of blankets.
- Brookstone. Sells bamboo/cotton towels.
- Totally Bamboo. This online store sells bamboo kitchen accessories, countertops, furniture, artwork and more. www.totallybamboo.com.
- Bamboo Textile. This online store sells bamboo-blend panties, bras, T-shirts and sweatshirts. www.bambooclothes.com.
- Bamboo Elements. This online store sells bamboo cosmetics, skin care and hair products. www.bambooelements.com.
- **Teragren**. This company sells bamboo flooring, panels and veneer. www.teragren.com.