

# Nandina domestica

## (Heavenly Bamboo)

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“Gardeners in Virginia have a ‘love it’ or ‘hate it’ relationship with *Nandina domestica* (aka heavenly bamboo) which has been grown in China and Japan for centuries. Those who love it describe its highly colored shiny leaves, its brilliant red berries, drought tolerance, winter interest, and multiple landscape uses. Those who hate it describe its toxicity and invasiveness.



Nandina domestica  
Photo by Phyllis Turner

*Nandina*, grown in USDA hardiness zones 5-10, is a broadleaf evergreen in zones 8-10, and is evergreen in my zone 7 garden in Bedford. It is in the Berberidaceae family. Despite its common name, heavenly bamboo, it is not a bamboo, but an evergreen shrub growing 3-9 feet tall and 3 to 5 feet wide. There are many dwarf varieties that range from 1 1/2 to 3 foot tall. Its glossy leaves are brightly colored pink to red in early spring, turning green in summer, then red or purple in fall. The flowers are white, appearing in early summer in clusters. The fruit is bright red berries appearing in late fall and

persisting throughout winter. It has many uses in the landscape as an ornamental plant. There are over 65 cultivars in Japan, where a national *Nandina* society exists.

All parts of the *Nandina* plant are poisonous, although not to humans. The berries are considered toxic to cats and grazing animals. Birds are generally not affected by these toxins.

While *Nandina domestica* is considered invasive in North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, and Florida, not all varieties are invasive. For example, varieties such as ‘Blush’, ‘Firepower’, ‘Harbor Bell’, ‘Firepower’, ‘Harbor Dwarf’, ‘Gulf Stream’ and ‘Firehouse’, are not fruiting, therefore, are not considered invasive. ‘Firepower’ *Nandina* is a noninvasive selection as determined by the University of Florida.

**Cultivation:** Because *Nandina* tolerates a wide temperature range (from -10 to 100 degrees F), tolerates a wide variety of soils, grows slowly (4 to 6 inches for some dwarf varieties), uses low to moderate amounts of water, is rabbit and deer resistant, and doesn’t need pruning, it is considered a low care plant. It will grow in full sun to part shade, even tolerate heavy shade, but will have brighter colors in full sun. It has no serious insect or disease problems. It prefers moist, fertile, acidic soil and protection from harsh winds.

Garden uses include shrub borders or open woodland gardens. It can be used in informal hedges, foundation plantings or ground cover (dwarf varieties).

Cultivars and Varieties: Clemson University website provides an excellent description of various *Nandina* cultivars and varieties.

<http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/landscape/shrubs/hgic1071.html>

According to Virginia Tech, *Nandina* grows and fruits best in the warmer parts of Virginia (6b and warmer). “This species will grow in zone 6a, however, it will suffer stem damage at temperatures near zero degrees F and below.”

<https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/2901/2901-1058/2901-1058.html>

My favorite *Nandina* is ‘Firepower’. Mine, which are about 4 years old, are about 3 feet tall and 3 feet wide. I never water them, even in the drought. They are sited in full sun. I’ve never fed them, but did put some compost around them one spring. I prune them heavily each December, only to use the beautiful foliage in Christmas arrangements at our therapeutic garden projects at the nursing homes. This variety does not bloom or set fruit. My ‘Firepower’ takes no care and provides me with beautiful color changing foliage year round.”

*Phyllis Turner,  
February 2015*



Nandina ‘Firepower’  
Photo by Phyllis Turner

### **References:**

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