

竹 The many uses of bamboo

Today bamboo is highly regarded by many for its environmental credentials—it is quick to grow and can be easily replenished. Light-weight and strong, it is also extremely versatile. In Japan, bamboo has long been appreciated for its versatility and has been used to make a wide range of essential and decorative products.

A quick look at a Japanese dictionary would reveal so many words that contain the character for bamboo—竹 *také*. You would begin to see just how extensively it has been used in Japan.

Bamboo seems to touch all aspects of Japanese life: the walls of traditionally built houses were constructed from bamboo lattices covered with clay; musical instruments particularly flutes such as the *shakuhachi* and *sho* are made from bamboo; the young shoots of certain types of bamboo can be eaten; the leaves are used to serve food or wrap sweets; *shinai* swords used in the martial art *kendo* consist of four slats of bamboo bound

together; children used to play with bamboo toys such as *taketombo* (bamboo helicopters) or *takeuma*, stilts made from bamboo; and today fabric woven from bamboo fibre, twice as absorbent as cotton, is prized for its naturally anti-bacterial properties and its silken feel.

Many of the bamboo items still commonly used are woven from bamboo. The techniques for weaving bamboo are thought to have come from China and Korea as early as the first century. The oldest existing bamboo objects in Japan date from the eighth century and are preserved among the treasures of the Shoso-in treasure collection in Nara; among them early examples of bamboo vases that are used in ikebana today. Fishing traps and sieves were once common woven items; to the present day, woven bamboo baskets, coasters and vases are still very much in use.

What's in a name?

There are actually two common words for bamboo: 竹 *také* and 笹 *sasa*. The first *také* is used to refer to the taller types of bamboo, and *sasa* for the smaller grass- or shrub-like bamboo.

Another reading of the character 竹 is *chiku* and this is how it appears as one of the three lucky elements of *shochikubai* (pine - *sho*, bamboo - *chiku*, plum - *bai*). The *shochikubai* trio is often used as a design motif on



Bamboo is still used extensively in Japanese gardens to make gates and fences or as water spouts and scoops such as at this stone washbasin.



A woven bamboo vase



A sweet wrapped in a bamboo leaf will be eaten using a bamboo stick; the teacups rest on woven bamboo coasters; all carried on a tray made from bamboo.



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Some essential tea ceremony utensils are made from bamboo: the *hishaku* (water ladle), the *chasen* (tea whisk) and the small tea scoop [resting on the tea canister].

everything from luxurious kimonos to everyday objects. Bamboo *chiku* symbolises vitality or strength. Even when laden with snow, bamboo rarely breaks and it remains green throughout the cold of winter.

Beyond the symbolism, the appeal of bamboo is certainly enduring and it shows no signs of waning as a material of choice.

Taketori Monogatari (Tale of a Bamboo Cutter) is one of Japan's oldest stories. There are differences in the telling of the tale, but is basically a story about a woodcutter who found Princess Kaguya in a glowing bamboo shoot. There is a story by this name from the Heian Period (794-1185) and to the present day it has been retold in many forms including animé and manga. The tale is often called *Kaguya hime* after the main character. You can find a simple version of the folktale *Kaguya Hime* at

<http://web-japan.org/kidsweb/folk/kaguya/index.html>.