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When Cane Was King: The Story Of Native Bamboo

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By R. Kelly Coffey

Traveling around the southern Appalachians, I occasionally glimpse a peculiar plant that does not seem to fit into any conventional category. It is tall enough to be a tree, yet has not other "tree" characteristics.

The plant's grassy foliage is attached to rigid (though not woody) stems that resemble corn stalks. These individual stalks grow so close together in dense patches that no other vegetation can compete within the jungle-like colony.

The feature that draws my attention is its exotic look. It seems so out-of-place in the mountains, as if someone had brought home a tropical specimen, and it had escaped from a protected garden. This unusual vegetation, however, is native to the southeastern U.S., including the southern Appalachians.
It is called "cane," or "river cane" to distinguish it from sorghum (molasses) cane, a cultivated, non-native species. Though

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reduced to odd, scattered colonies today, river cane was once a defining feature of the Appalachian landscape.

A Tall & Tough Plant

River cane is a type of bamboo, a group of plants belonging to the grass family. Although over 1,200 bamboo species exist worldwide, only one — Arundinaria gigantea — is native to North America. As the Latin name implies, this species grows to gigantic heights, as tall as 30 feet in very fertile soils.

Like other grasses, cane spreads via an underground stem called a “rhizome.” As the rhizome tunnels through the ground, it sends up shoots that produce the individual canes (or “reeds”) — as many as 65,000 per acre. This aggressive growth habit results in a large, impenetrable colony of canes known as a “canebreak.”

Cane can withstand an amazing variety of weather and climates. The plant endures hot, subtropical coastal plain summers as well as frigid mountain winters. In the mountains, cane is most often found at low elevations, especially along rivers and streams. Consequently, canebreaks are frequently flooded, but cane can endure relatively long periods under water. Even during extended drought, the plant survives and seems unhindered by such extreme conditions.

A bizarre characteristic of cane is its infrequent flowering process. River cane normally reproduces asexually by extending rhizomes, rather than by flowering and producing seeds. The plant will eventually bloom once in its life, but the year in which it flowers is impossible to predict because it follows no time pattern and seems unrelated to any environmental factor.

A canebreak may exist for as long as 50 years before blooming

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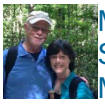
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occurs, while the rhizomes continuously enlarge the colony each growing season. Nevertheless, when the time arrives, cane responds to some mysterious signal and blooms aggressively, with every single reed in a locale flowering in unison. Botanists remain puzzled about the mechanism that triggers blooming.

Despite the vigor and longevity of an expanding canebreak, flowering portends the close of the plant's life cycle. After the blooming is over and the seeds mature, the entire canebreak spontaneously dies, as if it were an annual crop destroyed by heavy frost. All is not lost, though, because the cane produces numerous seeds which quickly sprout, reestablishing the canebreak to its former prominence in a short time.

In the past, when cane was more prevalent, the sudden death of a canebreak was a memorable event for rural residents, and a once-in-a-lifetime happening for many.

Used By Indians, Pioneers

Before the arrival of Europeans, and for many years thereafter, cane had a presence in the Appalachian landscape that is almost unbelievable today. Individual canebreaks measured in the hundreds of acres. One early observer described extensive canebreaks lining western North Carolina's French Broad River, uninterrupted for miles.

River cane dominated not only the physical landscape, but also was very distinctive in Native American culture, as well. The significance of cane to southern Indians cannot be overstated. Native Americans made numerous household goods from cane, such as baskets and mats. Cane was a component in knives, arrows, blowguns, fish spears, and other weapons. The reeds

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were a necessary building material, especially useful as roofing and in the construction of rudimentary furniture.

In the winter, when other forage was scarce, the evergreen canebreaks attracted wild game, concentrating deer, bears, and rabbits in familiar locations, thereby providing Indians a convenient food source. Native Americans even ate the cane itself, finding the young shoots tender and nutritious. With such a wide variety of uses, river cane was arguably the single most important resource for southeastern Indians.

As with most grasses, cane will tolerate a degree of grazing, but its overuse as a livestock forage was a significant factor in its decline. Canebreaks were unable to regenerate themselves, as cattle continuously overgrazed the foliage and hogs rooted out the rhizomes.

In addition, settlers coveted the soil in which cane grew. The presence of cane silently announced to farmers that the area's richest ground was below, especially suitable for corn and other crops. An early rule of thumb for soil fertility was that 10-foot-tall cane grew in good soil and 30-foot-tall cane indicated the best soil around.

Cane thrived in an ecological setting characterized by rich bottomlands and frequent fires. In fact, without a fire disturbance every few years, canebreaks began to weaken, thin, and die. Whether set intentionally by Indians or naturally by lightning, fire swept through canebreaks on a fairly regular basis.

Fire removed competitive plants as well as young hardwood trees that could eventually block the full sun necessary for cane's survival. Even though fire consumed the cane reeds and foliage, the rhizomes were protected underground and quickly sent up new shoots, restoring the canebreak quickly. Unfortunately, fire suppression became a priority as the frontier filled with white settlers, resulting in ecological conditions that

hampered the growth of cane.

Environmental historian Donald Davis aptly describes river cane before widespread settlement as “the signature plant species of riparian bottomlands in the mountains.” An echo of cane’s former ubiquity remains today in the numerous creeks, rivers and communities with “cane” in their name.

Despite the fact that cane prospered in a variety of environmental conditions, the collective impact of livestock overgrazing, cultivated crops, and fire suppression ultimately reduced vast canebreaks to the scarce and curious patches seen in modern Appalachia.

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Karen Baldwin • 2 years ago

Thank you for bringing forward in an engaging way a bit of native fauna I was surprised to learn we had. I had been unaware that North America had ANY native bamboo specie, and upon seeing it (with surprise) am able to appreciate the background you've provided in explanation of

its scarcity.

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