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**Sunday,
November 4**

Bamboozled

**Demystifying "Lucky
Bamboo"**

As the old millennium turned into the new and that indoor gardening phenomenon The Chia Pet® had completely saturated the market, there appeared (very possibly by stealth in the dark of night) a brand new player on the scene. Possessing the constitution of a pet rock rather than a delicate crop of Chia fuzz, this plant could live for years rather than days. And through word-of-mouth mythology, it charmed its way into the hearts, windowsills, mantles, desks, credenzas - and occasionally the trash cans and compost heaps - of gardeners from coast to coast.



Not so lucky

These little fellas cry for help on the shelves of a home improvement store. To prevent tip burn on



"Lucky
Bamboo" was
on a roll.

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your own Lucky Bamboo, keep your plant in bright, indirect light and change the water once a week. Use only bottled water because the fluoride in tap water can build up and kill the plant's cells. If your Lucky Bamboo begins to yellow, add an organic fertilizer. The salts and high phosphorus concentrations in synthetic fertilizers can actually cause more tip burn. Photo by Robert F. Gabella

Dracaena sanderiana (as Lucky Bamboo's mom calls it right before she says, "This is gonna hurt me more than it's

gonna hurt you!") is not really bamboo at all. It's actually a commonly grown member of a large genus of shrubs and trees in the *Agavaceae*, or agave family. Familiar to some as a dish-garden denizen in its white-margined form, this native of tropical West Africa (not Taiwan, where it's now grown commercially for export) is cultivated in frost-free climates as a small garden shrub. In the rest of the world it's known as a fairly slow-growing and generally well-behaved houseplant.

The phenomenon of the "Lucky Bamboo" came on the heels of the feng shui craze of the 1990s. Most of the first arrivals to the U.S. were precisely formed, sectional cuttings of straight stems -- barely rooted and only recently leafed out. Others came as spirally trained stems bundled together, usually in threes or fives. Most all were placed in ceramic containers of water and polymer gel or decorative gravel. Often adorned with plastic or metal charms -- and occasionally tagged with placards extolling the legendary qualities of the good luck these plants would bring -- the gifting of these generally homely plants spread like wildfire. And as it did, an untold number of hapless recipients who didn't wish to "break the spell" reluctantly accepted them despite their ungainly appearance and the fact that they clashed with nearly every conceivable form of modern décor.

Unless they sit for months of endless frying, drying and re-soaking on the shelves of typical home centers, drug store, or grocers (where you can often find them in varying states of near-death), Lucky Bamboo is nearly impossible for even the most marginally-responsible houseplant owner to kill. (Or maybe we are so superstitious about letting these plants die that they actually encourage us to become better gardeners!)

So, just what is this so-called legend all about? According to bamboo4luck.com, "For centuries, Lucky Bamboo has brought good luck and fortune not only to the gift recipient but also the gift giver." I can only say that this is a highly unlikely claim because the plant has not even been cultivated in the Orient for that long!

Diane Kern, bellaonline.com's feng shui editor, is much more restrained in her comments and says simply that "a healthy, green plant brings a lively qi (or energy) into the home and this little plant adds a lot without asking much of you."

(Yet plants with linear or pointed leaves are usually discouraged in feng shui because they're suspected of harboring and transferring "negative qi.")

However, in the one and only posting concerning Lucky Bamboo on The American Feng Shui Institute's website (amfengshui.com), international feng shui expert Janice Sugita states, "The energy from the sharp leaves is not the issue...It is the physical danger of being hurt by the thorns or leaves that creates a "sha" [negative qi]."

The real dilemma arises when the traditional feng shui properties of true bamboos, members of the grass family, *Poaceae*, are intentionally hijacked in efforts by unscrupulous marketers looking to cash in on the supposed mystique of "fake" bamboos.

The marketed myth of Lucky Bamboo is certainly not the first advertising ploy ever concocted to advance the commercialization of a plant species.

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Paul Ecke Sr., patriarch of the Ecke Poinsettia Ranch, created his own legend involving the humble offering of a beautiful roadside flower by Pepita, "...a poor Mexican girl who had no gift to present the Christ Child at Christmas Eve Services." Because Ecke's story was so widely circulated in newspapers and magazines in the mid-20th century, many people still believe that's how the poinsettia was discovered.

But, if fabricated superstition is the engine by which new gardeners are born -- and that birth is seen as a blessing by more conscientious merchants -- then maybe it's all right to be bamboozled!



A lifelong gardener, Robert F. Gabella has been involved in the horticulture industry since 1983. With an AAS in ornamental horticulture and a BA in business management, Bob is an Illinois Certified Nursery Professional, an independent consultant, hybridist, writer and photographer. He also tends prize-winning gardens at his Villa Park home.

intended

05/11/08: Edibles in containers

05/04/08: Rhododendron varieties

04/27/08: Rhododendrons

04/20/08: Flutter bys

04/13/08: Lessons from the Masters

04/06/08: Heaven scent: Sweet peas