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Bamboozled

Bamboo has captured the imaginations of green homebuilders and buyers, leading some growers to neglect their roots.

By Nina Shapiro

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You can't get much trendier than a house built by Pb Elemental Architecture. The firm's four town homes on north Beacon Hill (selling for up to \$680,000) feature radiant heat rising from the floors, garage doors that function as retractable living-room walls, rooftop decks with outlets for an outdoor kitchen, and bamboo—lots of bamboo. The stylish, fawn-colored material covers the stairs winding up the three-story units, the kitchen cabinets, and the bedroom and bathroom floors.

"We use bamboo flooring in every project," says Chris Pardo, Pb's co-founder. A big reason why, he says, is that "it's environmentally friendly." And buyers are looking for that, Pb broker Chris Stark adds, speaking above the din of drills as workmen put the finishing touches on the Beacon Hill homes. "They definitely understand that [bamboo] is a renewable resource that doesn't take down a huge forest to provide your flooring."

Indeed, bamboo has become big business. Bainbridge Island-based Teragren, one of the country's biggest manufacturers and importers of bamboo products, has seen revenue grow by between 30 and 40 percent in the past three years, and this year expects to rake in more than \$20 million, according to CEO David Knight. But ironically, the craze over this ostensibly green resource has led to some very un-green practices. In China, Vietnam, and India, where bamboo is grown, farmers are now clearing forests to make way for bamboo plantations, according to Jim Bowyer, director of the responsible-materials program at Dovetail Partners, a Minneapolis nonprofit devoted to environmental issues. As with any plantation, he says, "You tend to find a narrower range of plant and animal species [than you would in a natural forest]. You harvest it, and now you've got to ship it 7,000 miles...to satisfy a growing market on the other side of the world."

"Clearly, the green status currently accorded bamboo products needs serious re-evaluation," Bowyer concluded in a contentious report a few years ago entitled *Bamboo Flooring: Environmental Silver Bullet or Faux Savior?*

Van Calvez, head of product development for ecohaus (formerly the Environmental Home Center), a kind of green version of Home Depot that has stores in SoDo and Portland, Ore., says he's been hearing reports of bamboo-inspired forest-clearing for several years. In fact, as a flurry of new bamboo vendors has approached ecohaus, one company told him directly that it was

clearing land for a new plantation. "They didn't even realize what they were doing was a no-no for us," he says.

Concerned, Calvez says he asked his two bamboo suppliers—Teragren and California-based EcoTimber—"point blank" whether they were clearing land. He says they reassured him that their bamboo came from longstanding plantations. "We go into [bamboo] forests that have been there for 1,000 years," says Teragren's Knight, who contracts with farmers in China, where the company's factory is based. No planting is necessary, he says, since bamboo's root system continually sends up new shoots—as long as it is allowed to grow to maturity over six years or so.

But while Knight says his company insists that only mature bamboo be harvested, he allows that many companies hack it down in half the ideal time in order to reap twice the profits. So not only are some farmers clearing forests, they are also depleting their own bamboo stands—and incidentally creating a much softer, more easily damaged product.

"Everyone has heard horror stories about this stuff," says Curt Stiger, co-owner of SoDo's Major Brands Floors. "A lot of us didn't know much in the early days." That was around five years ago, he says, when "this market just got flooded with a ton of stuff." He noticed that the cheap stuff scratched and dented easily. "It's gotten to the point where we only sell one brand," he says—and that brand is Teragren.

The University Village's Anthropologie store has also found that its bamboo floor scuffs easily. "You've got to be really careful," says manager Lauren McConnaughey.

In his report, Bowyer argues for some kind of certification process to distinguish reputable, eco-friendly bamboo purveyors from those who merely pitch themselves as such. Heading in that direction, in April California-based Smith & Fong became the first bamboo company to receive certification from the Forest Stewardship Council for its operation. The German-based FSC certifies mostly wood forests in an attempt to make sure they are responsibly harvested, and Smith & Fong founder Dan Smith says he worked with the internationally respected organization for several years before it agreed to look at his suppliers' bamboo groves in China.

So far, the FSC, formed on the heels of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, has certified about 20 percent of the roughly 10,000 acres that serves Smith & Fong. The certification insures that Smith & Fong does not overharvest its lands, and also requires the company to maintain some permanently preserved natural forestland in addition to its bamboo plantations.

Nadav Malin, chair of the materials and resources advisory group for the influential Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program, run by the U.S. Green Building Council, says he is excited by the development. "It's something we've been hoping would happen for quite a while."