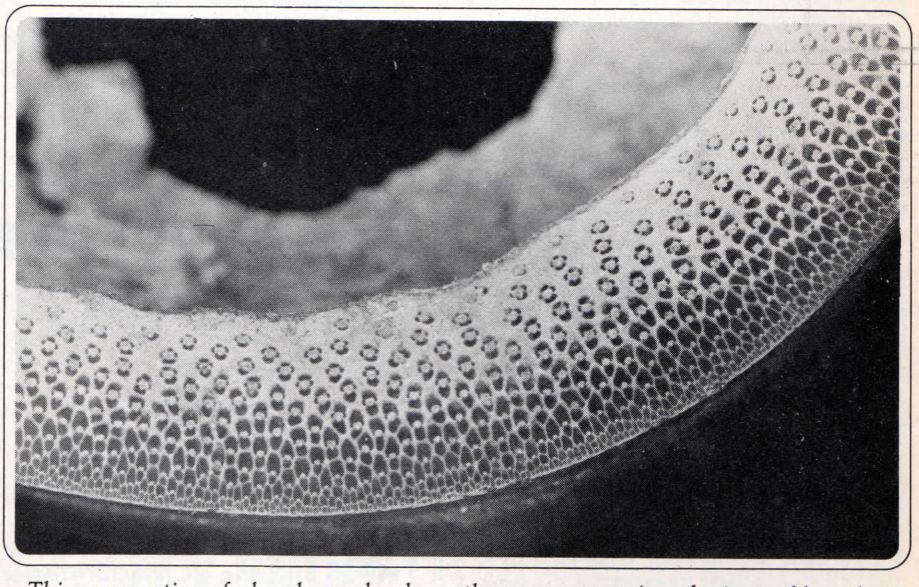
Rod Rack

Selecting Cane

HOAGY B. CARMICHAEL

FOR MANY HOME BUILDERS of bamboo rods the most difficult problem is finding good raw material from which to work. Buying bamboo culms (poles) by the bundle is an expensive and often unsatisfying experience, much like taking a blind date to the prom: You never quite get what you're hoping for. Because most users of cane cannot make the trip to New Jersey to visit Mr. Demarest's warehouse, for the purposes of this article I will assume that you have received an average bundle of culms. It will now be our job to select the best cane for the rods you intend to build.

First, take a minute and carefully inspect the butt end of one of the poles with a high-powered magnifying glass. You will note that the small fibers are actually six-sided and separated from one another by a resinous material known as lignin. If you look at several of the poles you will see that there is a marked difference between the depth of the layers of the darker outer rim of primary fibers from culm to culm. Find the culm with the most compact layer of primary fibers and use this one as your benchmark. It is ideal if you can use bamboo that has a 1/8-inch-wide outer rim of compact fibers that are bound together so closely that individual fibers cannot be seen by the naked eye from a foot away. It is this dark, compact layer of fibers that you must learn to evaluate because they contain the power — and the staying power — that your rod will have within the range of any given rod taper.



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This cross section of a bamboo culm shows the compact spacing of primary fibers that you should look for when choosing cane

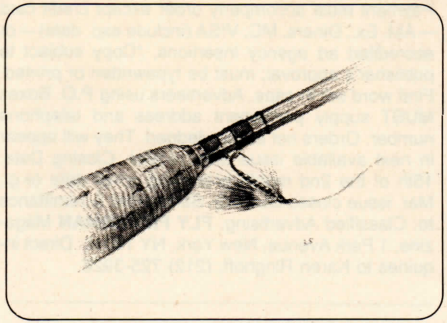
These closely knit primary fibers will, when all of the pith and excess bamboo is planed away, be the matrix of your finished rod. Therefore, it is important to give some thought to the kind of rod you hope to build, and then to consider the hand you have been dealt. Larger, longer rods meant to handle heavier lines will require your very best cane. At the same time you should separate the culms with the diameter of the butt end of the pole in mind. Larger diameters do not necessarily mean that the band of primary fibers will be thicker or more compact. But, assuming you have two culms with the same high-quality primary fibers, you should reserve the culm with the larger diameter for the rod with the heavier taper. In this way you will, for the most part, avoid the problem that the natural curvature of the bamboo's rind side causes when you attempt to index that side of the strip against the 30-degree side of the planing forms. I think it's fair to say that you should try to save those culms with larger circumferences for rods of eight feet and longer.

You can make your own test when trying to determine which of your larger culms has the densest primary fibers. Pick up each of the larger poles and balance them, one by one, in your hand. Assuming they are the same length and none of them is loaded down with moisture, you will soon be able to feel the "heft" of the better pole.

Nodes are, as Mr. Garrison once said to me, "Job's gift to the rod maker." Because of their lack of tensile strength, nodes interrupt the continuous power of the fibers built into your rod. So when looking over a handful of poles you should determine which of the better ones have nodes that do not rise much above the surface of the internodal bamboo. When building a rod section these nodes must either be filed flush with the internodal cane or compressed and then filed — whatever method you prefer. The result is that you have further weakened the weakest portion of the rod strip. The less filing the better, so make sure to examine the general characteristics of the bamboo on either side of the lip of the nodes. Pronounced indentations or humps will re-

quire extra filing or heating to bring the node into line, and this will further weaken the strip.

While I consider the two points covered above to be paramount when selecting bamboo, there are several other considerations that you should be aware of



Loren Smith

when you are looking for the best material. Avoid culms that have splits in them, especially in the butt end (the end with the larger diameter) from which much of the material for your rod will be taken. Splits make it more difficult for you to select which portions of the culm you will use. In addition, splits usually don't follow a particular set of fibers throughout the length of the culm, which results in a loss of usable bamboo. In that connection, you should also look at the smaller end of the culm for leaf nodes. These are small indentations left by branch buds, and they cannot be used in a rod strip. You can split around them, but then again the leaf node just might be positioned at a point on the culm that you had planned to use for a tip strip.

While bamboo is intended to translate the taper of your rod sections to the delivery of the line and the fly, I consider the coloration of natural bamboo to be one of nature's best efforts. In short, I feel that watermarks and other natural discoloration of the bamboo are objectionable. Mind you, watermarks have no influence on the strength of the bamboo or on its ability to hold an edge when being planed. The only problem is that watermarks look awful. You should attempt to make a rod that is cosmetically pleasing, and dark splotches along the strips should be avoided. So when selecting bamboo try to use culms that have as few watermarks as possible, and then attempt to split around the darker portions and only use the clean, straw-colored wood for your strips. There is nothing prettier.

Bamboo can be ordered from: Charles H. Demarest, Inc., 45 Indian Lane, P.O. Box 67, Towaco, N.J. 07082.