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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Smart Shopping for Home Furnishings

Selecting Bamboo and Rattan Furniture

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Shopping for bamboo and rattan furniture? Furniture made from high-quality bamboo or rattan is an excellent investment because it never wears out. A little consumer knowledge of these materials can help you make wise purchase decisions. To make the right decision, you should be able to answer these questions:

- WHAT'S ON THE MARKET?
- WHAT DO I LOOK FOR IN QUALITY?
- WHAT'S ON THE LABEL?
- WHAT'S ON THE WARRANTY?

WHAT'S ON THE MARKET?

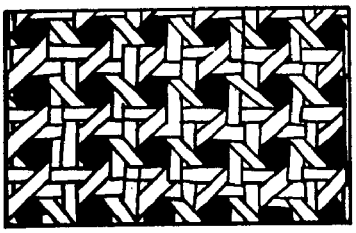
You can still find beautiful furniture made of bamboo. However, most of the furniture sold today is made of rattan. Bamboo and rattan are often confused.

Bamboo is not as strong or flexible as rattan because it comes from tropical grasses having hollow stems. Furniture made out of bamboo is generally wrapped because there is nothing to screw into.

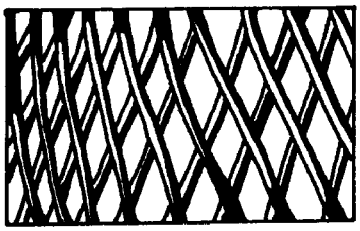
Rattan is made from a climbing tropical tree that wraps around other trees in the jungle. The stems have growth joints and thorns. To make furniture, the thorns are cut off, leaving nodes on the stem. The outer skin is removed before the stems are made into furniture. Rattan stems are solid and tough. The thickness of the stem varies from ¼ inch to 2 inches. Rattan stems and the outer skin of rattan are used to make different parts of furniture, which include the structural framework and the woven parts.

Cane, wicker, and peel wrap are generally made from rattan. These can also be made from other materials (see Figure 4.1, Cane, Wicker, and Peel Wrap). Cane made from rattan is taken from the cut side skin, which is flat. The cane is split into strands and woven while wet. Cane is used as chair seats, backs, sides, to wrap joints, and as a decorative trim. Wicker is made from the core of the rattan stem, which is shredded into long round strands that are woven and used in furniture. Peel wrap is made from the same outer skin of rattan as cane only used to wrap the joints of rattan furniture.

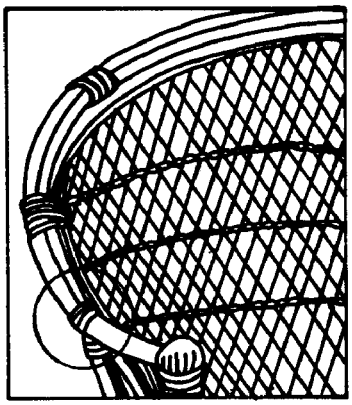
WHAT DO I LOOK FOR IN QUALITY?



Cane



Wicker



Peel Wrap

Figure 4.1. Cane, Wicker, and Peel Wrap

When looking for rattan furniture, shop at more than one store or at a store that has several brands so you can compare the different qualities of rattan. There are several characteristics to look for.

The thickness of rattan determines price as well as quality. The larger the diameter of the stem, the sturdier the piece of furniture. A good sized stem is 1½ inches in diameter.

The smoothness of the rattan stem determines the quality of the color and finish. Rattan should be smooth, with no hair-like strands hanging out. Good quality rattan is sanded smooth. Rub your hand across the rattan surface to check for smoothness.

The color evenness of the rattan stem once finished and the uniformity in shape of the rattan stem are good indicators of quality. Rattan stems are graded in A, B, or C. Grading is determined by uniformity of shape and color. The A grade surface is extremely smooth and uniform in color. The B grade surface is a little rougher surface than the A grade and shows a larger shape and color variation when stained. The C grade is uneven in color and shape. The C grade stem also has dents, splits, a rough surface, and hair-like pieces sticking out of the stem. No matter what is done, a C grade cannot be made into an A grade stem. Grade has to do with only color evenness and uniformity of shape, not strength. All stem grades the same diameter are the same strength.

If the stem grade is not indicated on the label, you can look at the stain and finish to determine quality. High-quality rattan has a even stain without blotchy colored areas. If the growth joints are a great deal darker than the other parts of the stem, it is a lower quality rattan. The lowest grades of rattan have dents, splits, and hairlike pieces on the surface. If the rattan has a split, the stress created by sitting on the chair or other piece of furniture will make the split move back and forth and become larger.

Rattan is put together with glue, nails, screws, staples, and wrap. Glue holds the rattan quite secure. Nails and staples may not hold and work loose. The higher quality rattan is put together with screws counter sunk into the rattan and covered with wood plugs. In keeping with the rattan look, some manufacturers wrap the joints with peel wrap. The wrap ends are usually fastened down with glue or nails. Check the wrapping to see if it is secure, uniform in shape, and smooth, without hair-like pieces raveling off the edge. Also, check the stain and finish to see if it is chipping off. A good quality stain on the wrap is smooth and even in color throughout.

Some pieces of rattan furniture rest on a base, such as a swivel base. For quality, the rattan should be screwed into the base rather than nailed or stapled, and the base should be made of solid wood. If a swivel is used at the base, it should move freely and not squeak.

WHAT'S ON THE LABEL?

There is not a lot of labeling found on rattan furniture. Most retail stores remove the manufacturer's name and address from the piece of rattan furniture so the consumer does not

try to buy directly from the manufacturer. You will, however, find a label with the name of the retail store and the price. If rattan or bamboo chairs or sofas have cushions, it is required by law that a label be attached to the cushion indicating the fiber content of inner materials.

WHAT'S ON THE WARRANTY?

Generally you will not be given a printed warranty from the manufacturer. Buy from a reputable dealer and a well-known manufacturer. A well known manufacturer will generally repair or replace products that are defective or have poor workmanship.

✔QUALITY CHECKLIST

After each question, answer with a yes* or no.

1. Is the thickness of the rattan stem around 1½ inches?
2. Is the rattan stem free of any hair-like pieces?
3. Feel the rattan. Is it smooth to the touch?
4. Is the color, stain, and finish even without any blotchy areas?
5. Is the stem uniform in thickness throughout?
6. Are the joints held together with glue and screws, not nails and staples?
7. Does the frame feel sturdy when pressure is put onto the rattan?
8. If screws are used, are they concealed?
9. If wrap is used, is it secure and even in color?
10. If the rattan is anchored to a base, is it screwed into solid wood?
11. If a swivel is used, does it move freely without any squeaks?
12. Is there a warranty?

* If you answered all these questions with a yes, you can be assured of getting a high-quality piece of rattan furniture.

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