

BAMBOO AT 65°N

Remarkable *Fargesia Murielae Hareskov*
at the Botanical Garden of Akureyri in northern Iceland

text and photos by
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What amazing surprise when last week, visiting the Botanical Garden of Akureyri in northern Iceland, I was overwhelmed by a such explosion of colours to have had difficult to believe I was at latitude 65°N. But Iceland is also this, a continue surprise. On Friday 6th September 2013, I go to the Public Library to look for more informations about the history of the Botanical Garden and working online I was surprised, once again and more than before, to read in a pdf file "List of species cultivated in the Botanic Garden Akureyri 2008-2009" published on the website of the Garden, that among the Poaceae were listed also *Arundinaria Spathacea Hareskov*,

Pseudosasa Japonica, *Sinarundinaria Nitida*. The chief librarian Holmkell Hreinsson helps me to be in contact with Bjorgvin Steindorsson director of the Botanical Garden, reaching him by phone and asking for me to have an appointment for an interview and to know more about their bamboos. Third surprise, Mr. Steindorsson is so kind to be available to meet me within a half hour even if he was at home out of work and with guests. Also Icelandic people is a continue surprise.

It is around 4 pm when we meet to the Garden and I have the fourth surprise of the day: I am in front of one of the



most spectacular *Fargesia* I have ever seen. The bamboo is just one, not three as listed, almost hidden and difficult to see if visiting the park just along the main paths as I did the first time being late, but amazing and noteworthy, not just for the incredible miracle to have bamboo at a such northern latitude but above all for the magnificent look and health of the plant. Rich of leaves, no one damaged or with burned tips, new shoots perfectly upright around 2.5 m tall still close but in a such intense green to show good health and ready to explode with new branches and huge LAI (Leaf Area Index, i.e. sqm of leaves for each sqm of soil). The three species have been planted together in summer 2005 but two of them, *Pseudosasa Japonica* and *Sinarundinaria Nitida* didn't survive to the first winter. The remarkable plant standing in front of me is eight years old, magnificent, bought from a local nursery in Akureyri with the name *Fargesia Murielae Hareskov*, then listed with the synonyms *Arundinaria Spathacea Hareskov* and *Thamnocalamus Spathaceus Hareskov*, but its correct name is *Fargesia Murielae Hareskov*, a Danish variety from Hareskov locality, also promoted as variety "Harewood" translating into English the word "skov" which means "wood, forest".

Fargesia Murielae comes from the mountain Shinnengjia (31°N), Hubei province, central China, where it grows

between 2000 and 3000 m of altitude reaching around 3 m in height and standing temperatures around -25°C. The local annual average precipitation is around 2500 mm, in Akureyri around 600 mm/y. The first plants of *Fargesia Murielae* arrived to Europe in 1907 through the interest of the botanist Ernest Henry Wilson (1836-1930) of the Kew Botanical Gardens in England, exported from here to the United States of America in 1910 and then to Scandinavia through Denmark and Norway in 1930. The name of the species *Fargesia Murielae* is a dedication of Ernest to his wife Muriel but it is more commonly called as *Umbrella Bamboo* because of its curved branches to the ground, prostrated, to form an umbrella-like shape. This bamboo has a really long flowering interval (the period between two flowerings), considered around 80 years, and the last one, gregarious, all around the world, has been reported between 1993 and 1998. *Fargesia Murielae Hareskov* has been generated as a special Danish clone from this last world flowering from seedlings in Hareskov.

Fifth surprise, *Fargesia Murielae Hareskov* in Akureyri is growing 24 degrees of latitude more north of its mother land, and yet, after eight years which is the mature age, it has lost just around a half of meter in height, i.e. a loss of 2 cm each degree of latitude. This species infact is listed

by scientific literature as a short type growing not over around 3 m in height and we know that the more far is the latitude from the original one the more we lose sizes, both with temperate bamboos growing to tropical latitudes and with tropical bamboos growing at temperate latitudes. So, the bamboo at the Botanical Garden of Akureyri, to my point of view, gives us an important scientific data, i.e. not only demonstrating the really cold resistance of the species but more specifically that the cold resistance and the sizes have been kept almost original by the variety *Hareskov* still at 65°N.

I have measured both the diameter of the clump, the number of the culms and their prostration to the ground (the umbrella projection), reporting around 30 cm for the clump with about one hundred culms and around 250 cm for the prostration. Bjorgvin has guaranteed to me that the plant, arrived about 50 cm tall, in eight years has never been touched, neither digging the rhizomes nor pruning the canes. It is green all year round and just under snow it collapses more to the ground but recovering every year. At the time of my visit there were new perimetral shoots about 10 cm tall under the umbrella close to the canes-clump, and central shoots still closed but around 2.5 m tall. The plant started to shoot in July, so we can consider the shooting time for this species in Akureyri between July and September. Bjorgvin has precised to me "when we decided to enrich the collection of the Garden with some bamboos we were badly criticized, but we are demonstrating that bamboo can grow also in Iceland and even if with great limitations and well protecting it from strong cold winds as we do



here in the Garden growing it bordered by shrubs and tall trees, it is not so impossible as thought, with aesthetical effects really impressive... but people is still almost reluctant to accept it as an extraordinary plant suitable for Iceland and green all year round in a land with long dark winters lacking of photosynthesis... so, I am happy you will write about it”, and I have added “you did a really great job... evidently it is still easier to grow bamboo in Iceland than to believe it possible”.

Considering that new canes of *Fargesia Murielae Hareskov* are almost blue, one of the colours of Iceland, and that it is a clumping bamboo suitable to be cultivated in pots, it could be a really extraordinary surprise for the Icelandic gardening culture, as for its economy not yet risen up after the 2008-2010 collapse. Bamboos have already demonstrated all around the world to have great ecological and economical potentialities. Why not also in Iceland? Why to do not accept the challenge of Bjorgvin? Through the green we will make our planet more blue, but in Iceland it could be also possible that it is through the blue of *Fargesia Murielae Hareskov* we could make Iceland more green.

Opened in 1912 as Public Park, the first one in Iceland, from 1957 also as Botanical Garden, the oldest of Iceland,

today the Botanical Garden of Akureyri is one of the most northern public gardens in the world. The great part of the taxa are from arctic and alpine regions, for a total of about 3.5 ha with 6600 alien taxa and 450 native to Iceland. *Fargesia Murielae Hareskov* is close to the coffeehouse, northeastern corner.

PHOTOS

page 2 and 6: *Fargesia Murielae Hareskov*

page 4: Bjorgvin Steindorsson close to *Fargesia Murielae Hareskov*

page 7 and 8: views of the Botanical Garden

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