Phyllostachys *Gramineae* [*Poaceae*]

Phyllostachys is derived from Greek *phyllo-* (leaf) and *stachyo-* (spike, ear of corn) components with reference to the leafy spikes.

Bamboos are shrubby grasses and many have an unusual feature. Although there are some which do flower and fruit annually, most species (any one species at any one time) flower only once after about 33, 66, or 100 years, then produce fruit and die – whether a plant of the species in question is uncultivated or being cultivated (and growing inside or in the open air) or whether it is a mature specimen or a young shoot only a few inches high. Botanists would say such species are hapaxanthic. A recent example occurred in 1987 when Madake bamboo (*Phyllostachys bambusoides*) flowered after 100 years. The Japanese, who cultivate this bamboo on a commercial scale, are understood to have voiced the thought that the plant had committed mass suicide. This, authorities suggest, expresses an understandable distress at the significant economic loss experienced by devastated plantations.

An unusual and dramatic event of this nature is bound to have attracted various legends and beliefs. Such mass flowering is certainly viewed as a harbinger of trouble. In Kenya in 1980 it preceded an epidemic of bubonic plague – which does have a rational explanation. The sudden abundance of seed from the profusion of the unusually flowering species of bamboo *en masse* led to a massive increase in the rat population as they gorged themselves on the unexpected bounty – and the rats host the fleas which carry the disease.

Although the foregoing has unwittingly emphasised the negative side of a worldwide flowering of any one species there can be advantages too. In India after one such blossoming the copious supply of seed thus generated was eaten like rice and actually prevented a famine.