



Ferns: Beautiful, Durable & Deer Proof!

One of the most common omissions in natural landscapes are the ferns. Because there are native ferns from most habitats, because they're so reliable once established, and because deer don't eat them, ferns belong in almost every garden.

Before we get into the fun stuff, a very common and important topic is the source of ferns. Yes, they will probably survive being dug from the wild, but don't do it! If you have even the slightest interest in conservation, environmental protection, the stability and survival of native plant communities in the wild—leave native plants where they are. Buy them from a reputable, respected and experienced native plant nursery. Native plants grown in this way are propagated responsibly, by seed, spores, tissue culture, etc., and not dug from the wild. Because few growers actually propagate their own ferns, and thus rely on a supplier of young fern starts for potting up into larger containers in their nurseries, this question is even more relevant with ferns than it is with more commonly propagated perennials, grasses, trees, shrubs, etc. True propagation increases total plant quantities by coaxing new plants from a living plant—without killing it. Digging plants from the wild doesn't add to total plant quantity and often kills the parent plant anyway.

OK—ferns for the garden. In general, ferns fall into two groups: favoring the wet side of damp, or the dry side of damp. The extremes are of interest—some ferns prefer soils that are almost always saturated and sometimes inundated. Other ferns prefer very well-drained upland woods, or even rock outcrops (which may be cool and sometimes damp with seeping water, but are very different from swamps or wetlands). In overall character, the two habitats are very different.



WET FERNS

Common (and commonly available) examples of ferns that will thrive in wet soils are sensitive fern (*Onoclea sensibilis*), cinnamon fern (*Osmunda cinnamomea*), and to a lesser degree, ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*, or *M. pennsylvanica*). Of these, sensitive fern is the most densely spreading, eventually forming a lax ground cover of 1'-2' leaves all arising from a network of slim rhizome. Even when not expressing its full potential, this fern will form lush patches low to the ground. Cinnamon fern has a much more individual effect—the plant forms clumps that can age impressively to 3' tall x 6' wide or more. While you will see colonies in swamps and wet meadows, cinnamon fern doesn't have that same densely spreading habit. Ostrich fern, arguably the most tropical looking of the three, sends tough but feathery fronds up from a mini-stump—the effect is supposed to resemble an ostrich's plumage. I like to think of this fern as a smaller, temperate version of the tropical tree ferns. This one will spread with some vigor over time, with new mini-stumps popping up at wide spacing from the original—in other words, not a ground cover effect, but more of a patch or thicket or colony. Ostrich fern is also surprisingly drought-tolerant, so it has been used for years in dry shade and even in foundation plantings alongside houses. Its best uses are probably in a large mixed shade garden, in natural landscapes that strive for a design that doesn't look too designed, and in plantings that mix the best of horticulture and ecological restoration. In formal garden settings, the above ferns can all work well, as long as the conditions are ferny enough. Objectively speaking, sensitive fern is used the least commonly in landscape work.

DRY FERNS

Beautiful and commonly available examples of this group are Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*), lady fern (*Athyrium* spp.), wood fern (*Dryopteris* spp.) and hay-scented fern (*Dennstaedtia punctilobula*). Of these, Christmas fern is the most distinctive, being reasonably evergreen, even if the older leaves do get a bit tattered and lax over the winter. This fern favors rich upland woods, ravines, mountain stream banks, and generally well-drained but cool sites. It is not a spreader and works best in landscapes when mixed with woodland sedges, native wood-asters, violets, etc. Lady fern and wood fern are similar enough to the untrained eye that in many cases they are used somewhat interchangeably. In most garden settings that works fine. Within these two fern lineages are aggressive spreaders and more clumping types, but overall the foliage is a 'typical' woodland fern leaf about 2' - 3' tall, highly compound (divided), in long-triangular outlines arising from a central crown. Lady fern and wood fern can form nice ground cover effects as long as you allow taller plants into the ground cover category, which I like to insist. These two ferns also exhibit rugged drought-tolerance in shade. Hay-scented fern is considered too aggressive for some gardens (small or highly managed ones), but in natural landscapes it's a useful, charming small fern that grows more densely than any other. In cold northern woods and on forest floors that catch some sun, and common in disturbed (logged) areas, this fern creates a soft-carpet effect. The only problem is that sometimes the carpet is wall-to-wall...



There are other native ferns, including marsh ferns (*Thelypteris*), polypody (*Polypodium*), maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum*) and more. Almost as a rule, ferns aren't tender, delicate, fussy or wimpy. They are in fact gritty, resilient, adaptable and relatively fast-growing. Remember, as a plant-lover and conservationist, be careful about buying ferns that are 'salvaged'—often a code word for 'dug from the wild'. Ask when you buy ferns!