

Ferns a terrific addition



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Question: I would like to add some ferns to my landscape. Can you give some tips for growing ferns?

Answer: Delicate as lace, or seemingly tough as leather, ferns can be found in climates ranging from rain forests to tundra. Ferns make excellent landscape plants because of their attractive fronds and their ability to thrive where other plants fail.

The leaves of ferns are called fronds and provide the primary ornamental feature of the plants. Descendants of some of the earth's oldest plants, ferns have evolved into more than 12,000 species worldwide, some as tiny as moss and others as big as a tree.

Ferns offer a quiet, graceful beauty by softening landscapes indoors and out. Many are evergreen. They add color and texture to your landscape during the winter when other perennials have died back and certain shrubs are reduced to mere sticks.

Ferns come in many shades of green from chartreuse to deep olive. Ferns produce fronds that are tinted in red or have silvery variegations. Ferns possess a grace of form and movement that is unique among garden plants.

Ferns are easy to grow and wonderfully trouble-free. Ferns rarely succumb to diseases or insect damage and are deer resistant. Site selection in terms of drainage and light exposure is critical to production of high-quality ferns. Ferns will grow best in areas that receive one to four hours of direct sun or dappled light during the day.

Morning sun is greatly preferred. Shady areas often occur under trees, and it is entirely permissible to create planted areas under trees that incorporate ferns and other shade-loving herbaceous perennials, ground covers and shrubs.

Avoid hot, dry areas that receive several hours of direct sun in the afternoon or areas that receive sun all day.

Most ferns grow best in a well-drained soil, rich in organic matter. Ferns need a consistently moist soil. Therefore, mulching your fern plantings with your favorite mulch — such as leaves, dry grass clippings or straw — is highly recommended to conserve soil moisture and reduce weeds. When preparing a planting site for ferns, take the time to work in some compost and peat moss.

Most ferns are not fussy about soil pH, but some types prefer acidic soil. When planting, avoid covering the crown of the fern with soil as this

can cause rot. Plant ferns from fall to early spring.

If nature doesn't furnish an inch of rain weekly, watering will be necessary, especially during the first growing season after transplanting. Beyond compost added to the soil, ferns do not need fertilizer.

Here are some recommendations for our area:

Adiantum venustum (Himalayan maidenhair) — Fronds are 8-12 inches long and form arching mounds as they creep along the ground. Easy to grow and tolerates semi-dry conditions if planted in shade.

Athyrium niponicum (Japanese painted fern) — Deciduous colorful specimens that brighten the part shade to shady areas of the garden. Silvery fronds with a touch of blue and deep red stems make this fern stand out.

Cyrtomium fortunei (holly fern) — Fronds are long, and each individual pinna (leaflet) looks like a holly leaf. Medium to light green. More mounding in habit than upright, grows to 2 feet. Not tolerant of dry conditions.

Dryopteris dilatata (buckler fern) — Very lacy and dark green. It is brittle, so plant it away from trees that drop needles or seed pods. Noteworthy varieties include 'crispa whiteside,' 'Jimmy dyce,' 'lepidota cristata' and 'recurved form.' Grows to an estimated 15 inches.

Dryopteris erythrosora (autumn fern) — New fronds are coppery-pink, and cold weather brings a hint of russet to the otherwise deep green fronds. Expected size is 24 inches.

Dryopteris pseudo-filix-mas (Mexican male fern) — Emerald, green fronds, reaches 5 feet over time.

Polystichum munitum (western sword fern) — Ubiquitous Northwest native that's drought-tolerant, sturdy and will put up with a fair bit of sun. Grows to about 3 feet in size.

Polystichum neolobatum (long-eared holly fern) — Practically indestructible, with glossy surface of fronds that becomes overlaid with a silver wash as blades mature. Size ranges between 2-3 feet.

Ferns come in many sizes large and small. Some form small clusters and some sprawl to cover the landscape. Depending on the size and layout of your garden, you can use ferns in your landscapes for many purposes.

Ferns can provide a lush-green background to your flower beds. You can also incorporate them in your landscapes as specimen plants grown in containers or hanging baskets. We find them in the smallest apartments to the largest homes.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.



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