

Keeping up a Christmas fern



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Ask a Master Gardener

Question: I was given a potted Christmas fern for the holidays. Can you give me some advice on the care and maintenance of this lovely plant?

Answer: While the poinsettia remains the most popular holiday plant, a healthy Christmas fern makes a wonderful gift or decoration.

The Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) received its name because it stays green throughout the holiday season. Some people claim the origin of the Christmas fern's common name was given because the individual leaflets on each frond are stocking-shaped, reminiscent of Christmas stockings.

The Christmas fern resembles our Pacific Northwest sword fern. It is a robust, leathery fern with year-round glossy, green fronds. The narrowly lance-shaped fronds grow in clusters from a crownless rootstock and range from 1-2 feet in length.

The Christmas fern is popular as an ornamental plant for gardens, including naturalized gardens, as it is easy to cultivate in a range of environments and soils. Being evergreen, it is often used in winter-oriented garden design. In the right spot, it can be a good evergreen border or accent plant.

The fern has a tufted, clumping habit, with its fronds arising from a central growth point. It can form colonies but frequently grows alone or in twos or threes. In mass plantings, it makes an excellent plant to combat soil erosion or as a ground cover on shady or partially shady slopes.

It is easily divisible for gardeners with large areas to cover. It also generates a protective, concealing habitat for a number of ground-feeding and ground-nesting birds.

The fern is very easy to establish and grow where conditions are right. These ferns, like other outdoor ferns, enjoy cool, moist, humus-rich, well-drained soil in a shady location. Christmas fern is seldom found in soils that are too waterlogged or too rocky.

Plant Christmas ferns after



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the last frost, placing them 18 inches apart and deep enough to hold the roots without crowding. After planting your fern, put a 4-inch layer of pine needle, shredded bark or leaf mulch around the plants. Mulch will help protect plants and retain moisture.

Christmas ferns should be watered once a week or as needed to keep the soil consistently moist, but not overly saturated. Without adequate moisture, ferns will experience leaf drop. During the hottest days of summer, pay particular attention to watering.

A light application of granular fertilizer that is designed specifically for acid-loving plants should be applied around the soil under the fern the second spring after planting. Feed annually after this point.

Although you do not have to prune Christmas ferns, you should remove fronds that have been damaged or have turned brown before new ones unfurl.

You can also grow your Christmas fern indoors. Since the Victorian era, people have enjoyed growing all types of ferns indoors. Christmas ferns do best in front of a window

that receives morning sun and afternoon shade. Keep the ferns away from strong sunlight, especially during the summer. Direct sunlight will make them lose their leaves or turn their fronds yellow.

However, if the light level in the home is too low, you will see poor growth and yellowing fronds. Place your fern in a hanging basket or fern stand for best results. When considering Christmas fern indoor care, keep the soil evenly moist but not oversaturated. Ferns also love being misted at regular intervals with tepid, soft water unless the humidity of the whole room is kept high through the use of a humidifier.

In living rooms and family rooms, stand their pots on trays of damp pebbles or clay granules. Most ferns are forest or woodland plants and have tender, delicate roots adapted to the light forest soil, which is rich in organic matter. The right compost must be free-draining so that the roots never get waterlogged. Remove brown or damaged leaves at any time and use an appropriate granular fertilizer.

Christmas ferns will provide your garden with four seasons



The silvery fiddleheads of the Christmas fern emerge in early spring.

of deep, evergreen beauty. In addition, lovely silvery fiddleheads emerge in early spring for you to enjoy. A deer-resistant native of North America, this robust, easy to grow fern makes a terrific holiday gift. Trying your hand at growing your Christmas fern indoors or

outdoors is a satisfying way to enjoy this unique holiday gift year-round.

Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, by phone at 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.