

Fan-like ferns are ideal for shady gardens

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 rainforest to tundra. It's no wonder that they find their way to so many Pacific Northwest gardens.

Descendants of some of the Earth's oldest plants, ferns have evolved into more than 12,000 species, some as tiny as moss and others as big as a tree. Many are evergreen. They're a boon during winter when many other perennials have died back and certain shrubs are reduced to mere sticks.

Ferns are ideal for shady gardens. As the hot weather of summer arrives, the thought of working in shady gardens sounds wonderful. Many great plants for shady areas can be found among the ferns. The different species range from under a foot to as much as 3 feet tall. The leaves of ferns are called fronds and provide the primary ornamental feature of the plants. On ferns that are commonly used in landscaping, the fronds are generally finely divided and delicate in appearance. They offer a quiet, graceful beauty by softening landscapes indoors and out.

Ferns do not produce colorful flowers. However, they come in many shades



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

Ferns are easy to grow and are not generally prone to any major insect or disease problems. Site selection in terms of drainage and light exposure is critical to the production of high-quality ferns. Light intensity is a key factor in site selection. 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. Definitely avoid hot, dry areas that receive several hours of direct sun in the afternoon or areas that receive sun all day. Ferns require well-drained soil. Soils rich in humus with good surface drainage are preferred. Ferns need a consistently moist soil. Mulching a fern planting with your favorite mulch such as leaves, dry grass

clippings or pine straw, is highly recommended to conserve soil moisture and reduce weeds. When preparing a planting site for ferns, thoroughly turn the soil and remove any weeds. Spread a 2-3 inch layer of organic matter over the area and dig it in.

Here are some recommendations for our area:

Adiantum venustum (Himalayan maidenhair): Technically this charming fern is not evergreen, but it does manage to hold its foliage throughout our mild winter. Fronds are 8 to 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. New growth will reach and cover old growth if it's not clipped back. Small pink fiddleheads usually emerge in early March.

Asplenium scolopendrium (Hart's tongue fern): Looks too delicate to be hardy, let alone evergreen. But it is. Reaches 1 to 2 feet.

Athyrium niponicum (Japanese painted fern): Deciduous colorful specimens that brightens 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.

Blechnum spicant (deer fern): Sterile fronds of this native grow stiffly upright. It requires moist, acidic soil – typical of a Northwest forest. Leathery, dark green foliage best in shade, although it will tolerate some sun. Up to 36 inches.

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, to 2 feet. Not tolerant of dry conditions. The big-leaved holly fern, *Cyrtomium macrophyllum*, has a darker, larger pinna than *fortunei*. Grows 12 to 18 inches. Both like alkaline 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." Can grow up to 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. Grows to 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 up to 3 feet.

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

Polystichum polyblepharum (tassel fern): Prefers even moisture and dappled shade. Deep, dark green with a frosted green underside. Up to 2 feet.

Ferns are also popular for pots and indoor plants. Because of their graceful fronds and lush color, ferns of many types are used as hanging plants. They are used as specimens in atriums, greenhouses, and conservatories and we find them in the smallest apartments to the largest homes.

Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461, or 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.