



I am Frond of Ferns

Ferns appeared over 350 million years ago and were enjoyed by dinosaurs. Today, there are over 12,000 species of ferns, and we enjoy about 100 in our cold climate. To grow well, ferns do need moist soil. Remove dead fronds in the springtime. The plants are highly insect and disease resistant. Slugs may be a problem but can be controlled by hand picking. Collect slugs from under a board placed strategically nearby and drop the slugs into a vinegar or salt solution. Otherwise, fern maintenance is low. Rabbits and deer do avoid ferns.

Taller varieties of fern form a nice backdrop for our shady gardens, while smaller forms can be used for edging, groundcover, or incorporated with astilbe and other shade loving perennials. The finely structured leaves of fern contrast nicely with the broad leaves of hostas, pulmonarias, and bergenias. Many shades of green, different textures of frond leaves, and varying sizes are available. Ferns are ideal for the woodland wildflower gardens. Some ferns are clump formers--the crowns of these types increase in size from year to year, but do not cover much of the garden area. Ferns that are spreaders or creepers send out underground stems called rhizomes and can form large groups.

Most ferns will require full or part shade. Shady areas under trees may be quite dry and may require extra watering. Avoid windy sites; the delicate fronds may get injured and the plants will dry out more quickly. Ferns in sunnier locations might do well with increased water, but the fronds can fade or become dry in drought conditions. Prepare the planting location by mixing in large amounts of compost (at least half of the soil volume). What a wonderful use for those piles of chopped leaves that you collected from your neighbors during the mid night hours last fall, and later chopped up with your lawn mower! Or you can add peat moss, compost, or composted manure. Plant large ferns 3 feet apart; smaller varieties can be planted 6 to 12 inches apart. Spreading forms should be planted allowing room for expansion. Mail order plants are often sold as bare root, that is, all the soil has been washed off and the roots are packed in peat or other material to keep them moist. As soon as they arrive, soak the roots overnight in room temperature water. Plant bare root ferns with the crowns just below ground level. Potted plants are also available. Newly planted ferns will benefit from a small amount of liquid fertilizer or fish emulsion. Use a few inches of organic mulch around the plants to conserve moisture, control weeds, and improve soil conditions. Reapply mulch each year.

Your ferns will require steady moisture to thrive, but fertilizer needs should be minimal. A small amount of general purpose fertilizer, such as 10-10-10 may be added and watered in during the spring. Foliar feeding and organic fertilizers work well too. With mulch and shady conditions, you should not have much weeding. Since fern roots are shallow, avoid cultivating around the crowns of the plant.

If you would like to increase your fern numbers, the crowns may be dug and divided in the spring before much growth occurs. It may take a strong, steady hand and a sharp knife to divide a ball of fern roots. Offshoots of spreading rhizomes may be separated from the mother plants and placed in another location. Replant as soon as possible, fertilize a little, and water well. Ferns do not reproduce by seeds. Spores, the reproductive "seeds", are tricky and tedious to grow, but if you research the subject and are adventurous, go ahead and give it a try. Some hybrid ferns are sterile and can be propagated only by plant division. Fern societies exchange spores of different varieties.

Personally, I enjoy the large fronds of ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris* var. *pensylvanica*). It is easy to grow and forms an impressive background plant or edging. Try the Japanese painted fern, *Arthyrium niponicum* 'Pictum,' a foot tall fern with grey green/silver fronds. It was selected as the 2004 perennial plant of the year. Maidenhair Fern (*Adiantum pedatum*) is a beautiful little plant with unique circling fronds. Other recommended ferns for this area may be found in [Growing Perennials in Cold Climates](#) by Heger and Whitman.

Happy Gardening,

Joe Baltrukonis