

Fabulous Native Ferns

by Lyn Chimera

One of the joys of spring is watching fern fronds unfurl. They start with small fuzzy arcs just poking their little heads above the crown of the plant and slowly unwinding. When I see these “fiddle heads” I know spring is really here.

Unfortunately, ferns get very little attention as a garden perennial. In most perennial books they aren’t even mentioned. This is probably because they don’t have flowers and somehow people don’t think of them as perennials. They ARE in fact perennials, reliably returning each year to add beauty, texture and even color to our gardens.

Many people have the misconception that ferns are difficult to grow. This stems from the fact that they seem exotic, tropical, and not appropriate for our cooler climate. That couldn’t be further from the truth. The Northeast has numerous varieties of native ferns in its woods and meadows. If they grow successfully on their own, how hard can it be to grow a few in our gardens?

Like any plant you need to match the conditions in your garden to the requirements of the fern. They are perfect for a moist, shady location, but that is not the only habitat suitable for ferns. Some can tolerate quite a bit of sun and others will handle dryer soil.

One of the advantages of growing ferns is their almost year-round interest. From unfurling in the spring, through the summer’s lush textured foliage, to the beautiful caramel and amber colors of the fall, ferns add interest, texture and depth to the garden. The green provides a resting spot for the eyes as well as making the colors of the blooms around them stand out.

Ferns have been growing for more than 300 MILLION years! In fact, in prehistoric times, they were a dominant

part of the vegetation. Today there are about 12,000 species of fern worldwide and more than 50 species native to the Northeast US.

The following are some of my favorite native ferns. They are generally available at nurseries and will grow well in our area. One of the most important features of ferns is deer don’t like them! That alone is reason to try a few.

Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*)

If you want to try just one fern the Christmas fern has the most adaptable requirements. It prefers rich, moist soil but will also tolerate dry soil. Christmas ferns like shade but will take partial sun if the soil is moist enough. One of the things setting this fern apart is the fronds are evergreen so you have the deep green color all winter. Christmas ferns are not invasive. The clump just slowly gets larger staying 12 to 24 in. tall.

Ostrich Fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*)

This is a large fern, 24 to 72 inches tall. It loves moist shade or part sun and will even tolerate occasional standing water. It’s ideal along a stream or near a pond. The fronds emerge from a central crown which looks like a dark brown clump on the ground in the winter. This is the fern that has the tastiest fiddleheads which are prized like asparagus in the spring. Ostrich fern can become aggressive sending out new underground shoots so don’t put it somewhere it doesn’t have a little room to spread or be prepared to share as they multiply.

Lady Fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*)

Lady fern is one of the most common ferns in WNY woods. It is easy to grow if given moist, rich soil and shade to partial sun. The Lady fern stays 16-36 inches tall and has an attractive,

lacy appearance. It forms a lovely amorphous clump which won’t take over your garden.

Cinnamon Fern (*Osmunda cinnamomea*)

A spectacular rounded clump forming fern that gets 30 to 60 inches tall. Its’ fiddleheads are hairy and very visible in Spring. The spore fronds turn cinnamon colored when mature, hence its name. Unfortunately, they don’t persist through the season, but die back after releasing their spores. Cinnamon ferns prefer moist to wet soil.

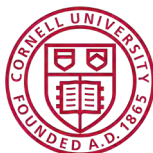
Maidenhair Fern (*Adiantum pedatum*)

One of our most beautiful native ferns, always a showstopper. Its fronds unfold on wiry, delicate black stems. The green fronds form a double-sided swirl of leaves from the top of the stem. Maidenhair ferns grow 12 to 20 inches tall and prefer partial to full shade and moist, well-drained soil. This is not a fern that will grow in standing water. One of my favorite features of Maidenhair fern is the deep burgundy color they turn in fall, stunning!

If you have the appropriate spot, give one of our native ferns a try. They will reward you with beauty throughout the growing season for years.



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