



Landscape Ferns

Ferns offer unsurpassed variety for use in the home and garden. They can be grown in pots, hanging baskets, beds and rock gardens, and as specimen plants, or they can be massed as ground covers.

GROWTH HABIT

Before planting, consider the look that you want to achieve. While some ferns form clumps, others spread and make colonies. Some ferns are dainty and airy while others are stiff and leathery. Many ferns have reddish color when fronds are young, with a few varieties offering color in their mature fronds.

EXPOSURE AND HABITAT

Ferns are a natural in shady areas where other plants fail for lack of light. Brooks, ponds and low, slow draining areas almost beg for ferns. Take advantage of boulders and fallen logs for fern planting sites, or plant a fern or two next to a rustic bench to spruce up a favorite rest spot. Since most ferns occur naturally in cool, moist, wooded areas, try to approximate these conditions in your landscape.

Ferns seldom look their best in full sun during the height of Brazos Valley summers. When growing ferns in full sun, be prepared to give them extra water to prevent leaf margins from burning. A cool, filtered sun or shady spot helps them retain moisture.

SOIL AND PLANTING

Soil should contain plenty of humus, peat moss, and rotted bark mulch or leaf mold. Most ferns prefer a soil that's slightly acidic. Adding large amounts of pine straw or pine bark will help increase soil acidity and improve porosity. For the few ferns preferring alkaline soil, try adding dolomite lime. This is generally not necessary for the Brazos Valley corridor.

To conserve moisture and cut down on weeds, keep your fern beds well mulched. Natural mulches, like shredded leaves, pine straw and ground bark tend to look best, as

they most closely approximate the appearance of native fern habitats.

FERTILIZING

Organic fertilizers, such as manure, fish emulsion, and blood meal are preferable because they lack the salts found in chemical fertilizer. These salts build up over a period of time, causing leaf edges or tips to burn. If you must use chemical fertilizers, those applied in liquid form are best, but they should be diluted to at least half the recommended strength. Similarly, slow-release fertilizer granules should be applied sparingly.

NOTE: Never fertilize dry soil. Be sure to water ferns well before and after fertilizing.

CONTAINER PLANTING

Clump-forming ferns work best for container gardening, as they don't try to run out of the pot but will form nice bushy plants. Cotton burr compost will provide extra peat moss and ensure adequate drainage. Containers must have a drain hole to allow excess moisture to escape.

Keep in mind that containerized ferns will dry out more quickly than those planted in the ground. Check them frequently, especially during hot, dry summers.

Many plant lovers shy away from ferns because they are thought to be hard to grow. They are really quite easy to care for, if a few simple practices are followed.

Ferns must have humidity, something there is little of in modern homes. You can humidify your ferns by filling a saucer or tray half full with gravel and letting the plant pot sit on top of the gravel. Keep a little water in the gravel at all times. Do not let the water level reach high enough to touch the bottom of the pot. If your potted fern is placed in a decorative planter, you can stuff moist sphagnum moss between the pots to moisten when necessary.

Ferns do best in areas not heated to more than 72 degrees. Temperatures from 60 to 65 are ideal. Keep ferns away from drafts.

WATERING

Use distilled or rain water, if possible. Tap water should be drawn and allowed to stand several hours before applying. Do not pour water over foliage. If you water your hanging fern by immersing it in water, do not let the water wet the foliage. Outdoor hanging fern baskets should be in complete shade and protected from the wind. Soil should be kept moist at all times. Good drainage is important.

INSECTS

Should you find it necessary to use an insect spray on your ferns, try insecticidal soaps, a nonchemical insect control. Be sure to follow the label directions for mixing.

FERTILIZING

Potted ferns should be fed monthly from March to October. Ferns growing in hanging baskets should be fed every two weeks. Use only organic fertilizers, fish emulsion being one of the best.