

Fantastic Ferns!

By, Kelly Fial

Erie County Master Gardener



Christmas fern fiddlehead (curly plant)
CREDIT: David Stephens



Christmas fern frond (leaf) CREDIT: Rebecca D. Wallace,
University of Georgia, Bugwood.org

Ferns have existed in tropical jungles, lush forests, and swamps for over 360 million years. Throughout the world, some 11,000 species thrive in filtered shade as understory plants. The longest-living specimens can survive for 100 years. Ferns have been depicted in art, intricately described in literature, and their structure incorporated into architecture.

Many types of ferns make excellent houseplants, and some do equally as well outdoors in warm weather. Ferns need humidity to survive, as well as partial or indirect light. To help maintain humidity, place your ferns on a tray of fine gravel, and mist the foliage frequently. Bathrooms and kitchens are good locations for ferns, due to the level of humidity. Another moisture retentive method is to place the fern pot inside a slightly larger pot, filling the space between the pots with moss. Soak the moss when watering,

and the fern will remain moist longer. Clemson Cooperative Extension publishes a listing of ferns and other plants, complete with growing conditions (hgic.clemson.edu).

There are three major parts to a fern: the rhizome, fronds, and sporangia (reproductive part). From the rhizome (beneath the soil), the fronds grow upward from a tightly coiled spiral, called a fiddlehead, “unfurling” the new growth vertically. Some ferns spread by rhizome, sprouting new tiny fronds along the length of the rhizome.

Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) is a native perennial evergreen fern, growing on shady slopes in well-drained soil. Glossy green fronds grow 24-36” high and wide, and the fern does not spread or naturalize. The fern clumps will increase in size, and remain well-behaved in the landscape. Indoors, it thrives in a sunny window with partial shade.

Bird’s Nest Fern (*Asplenium nidus*) reaches 18” tall, sports wide, smooth, undivided fronds, and is easy to grow. The soil needs to be kept moist, and this fern prefers a northern window.

Cretan Brake Fern (*Pteris cretica*) is easy to grow. Keep the soil barely moist, and place in a northern window, with daytime temperature of 68-72 degrees, and 50-55 degrees at night. Others to try may include Sword Brake Fern, and Crested Spider Brake Fern.

Boston Fern (*Nephrolepis exaltata*) is a humidity-loving plant. Keep the soil barely moist, and place in a window with bright indirect light. Fronds reach 10-12” long, and some cultivars reach 3 ft. in length. In summer, place a fern in a hanging basket and display on your porch. Don’t be surprised if a robin decides the fern makes a great location for a nest!

Rabbit’s Foot Fern (*Polypodium aureum*) displays striking, “fuzzy” rhizomes which creep across the top of the soil; (do not bury the rhizomes). The fern enjoys bright indirect light, watering until just moist, and daytime temperatures of 68-72 degrees, and 50-55 degrees at night. Fronds grow 2 ft long.

Kangaroo Paw Fern (*Microsorium diversifolium*) does well in hanging baskets. It is easy to grow, reaching 1 ft. high, and 3-4 ft. wide. Keep in a bright northern window, with moist soil, but not wet.

Indoor ferns can be incorporated into large patio pots, if carefully placed in the shade of a taller plant. The other plants help retain moisture, and the fern helps add texture and shape to the patio pot. Large ferns can also add dimension to the landscape if provided with a shady location. A large Boston Fern surrounded by Impatiens (also a shade loving plant) can be a focal point in the yard. Ferns provide some of the most beautiful foliage; let’s use our imaginations to bring them the attention they deserve!