



Uncanoonuc Mt. Perennials

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FERNS for the GARDEN

Ferns, glorious ferns. They grow now, as they have since the misty days of pre-history, all over the world. We in the north are blessed with a long list of hardy types. Some native to New England, some not. There are so many of them - with marvelous forms, textures, and, yes, even colors. Some for many different kinds of garden, wild or tame. Ferns for sun as well as shade, for wet, merely moist or quite well-drained soils. There are delightful miniatures and magnificent specimens. Many are lush, fluffy fillers with a glory all their own. None of them blossom. They reproduce by spore not seed, who needs flowers? Ferns offer the gardener such compelling beauty - blossoms aren't missed. At all. They can stand alone or they can be other plants' flattering companions. Their often fine-textured foliage magnifies the impact of bold leaves, think hosta and hellebore. Their often soothing colors can be effective foils for bright blossoms, like the classic lady fern - true lily combo. Here the fern also masks the declining foliage of the post-bloom lily, a worthy job in itself. The brighter colors of some ferns can reflect and magnify the impact of nearby blossoms like the maroon and silver of the Painted Fern playing off the pink or red spires of astilbe. Many have rich tawny to yellow fall foliage color. I've grown ferns for at least twenty-five years and add more to my garden every year. Here are a few oh-so-garden worthy ferns.

Royal Fern *Osmunda regalis*

Spectacular, clump forming native. Thrives in partial shade to shade in fairly rich, consistently moist or even wet soils. Grows 4-6' high (moisture is the determining factor) and 2½-3' wide. Bold textured fern with widely spaced leaflets on huge fronds and an upright vase-shaped habit. If there's not enough sun to grow the big ornamental grass you want, maybe royal fern could be a more than adequate stand-in.

Ostrich Fern *Matteuccia struthiopteris*

Imposing, spreading native can be used as a large scale ground cover. Tolerating full sun to shade, it prefers constantly moist to wet soils. Averaging 3½' in height it can, under the right conditions, reach 4-5' high. (The tallest I've ever seen topped a lofty 7', but that's unusual.) Swampy conditions suit it, but are not necessary. I know of lovely stands of ostrich fern at home in the fairly rich, moist but well-drained soil favored by rhododendrons. This is the edible Fiddlehead Fern whose emerging crosiers (immature fronds) are a delectable springtime treat.

Cinnamon Fern *Osmunda cinnamomea*

This slow spreading, handsome fern grows 3-4' high and 2-3' wide. Adaptable to sun or shade, this native thrives in acid, constantly moist soil. The strong upright fronds form an open vase that encircles the decorative, rusty brown, fertile fronds that emerge in early summer. Give the Cinnamon Fern room to display its lovely form. Crowding it - or any fern - lessens its impact in the garden.

Fortune's Holly Fern *Cyrtomium fortunei*

At home in shade to partial shade and fairly rich, moist, well-drained soil. Fortune's is the hardiest of the Asian Holly Ferns and is nearly evergreen in zone 5. The glossy, deep-green, bold textured foliage earned the common name which notes its resemblance to the evergreen hollies. Arching fronds form handsome, open, 1½-2' high, vase-shaped clumps.

Hayscented Fern *Dennstaedtia punctilobula*

A workhorse and a personal favorite, this native makes an incomparable ground cover. Growing in full sun to shade, in wet to dry soil, Hayscented Fern is nothing if not adaptable. Spreading rapidly by shallow rhizomes it forms a flowing mass of very fine-textured, soft green fronds. Its delicate good looks defy its rugged constitution. Should it outgrow its bounds it is easy to "give it a good talking to" with a spade and reduce its footprint.



(continued on back)

Maidenhair Fern *Adiantum pedatum*

Another sturdy native with deceptively delicate good looks, Maidenhair Fern thrives in partial shade to shade in cool, rich, moist soil. Growing 1½-2' high and wide, distinctive shiny, purple-black stems support dainty foliage held in fan shaped fronds. It is gorgeous spring through fall.

Lady Fern *Athyrium felix-femina*

Grows 2½' high and 2' wide in full sun to shade, prefers fairly rich, moist to even wet soils. Lady Fern is a slow spreading, clump former whose soft green, delicate textured fronds are lovely in small or large groupings. There are many different varieties of this native and many hybrids, both old and new. '**Lady in Red**' Fern has lacy, soft green foliage held aloft by brilliant burgundy stems. It originated at *The Garden in the Woods* (headquarters for The NE Wildflower Society) in Framingham, MA. '**Frizelliae**' **Tatting Fern** is a petite 12-14", whose long narrow fronds resemble strings of beads. A treasure from Victorian days when ferns were celebrated, the fancier the better. Its compact size makes it easy to grow in a container and brings its intricate beauty up close.

Japanese Painted Fern *Athyrium niponicum 'Pictum'*

Lovely fronds are grey-green marbled with silver, highlighted with maroon mid-ribs. Painted Ferns grow 1-1½' high and wide in slow spreading clumps. Thriving in partial shade to shade in fairly rich, moist, well-drained soil, their foliage, like many other ferns, makes a wonderful addition to fresh cut flower arrangements. This was the 2004 Perennial Plant Association's Plant of the Year, a richly deserved honor. There are many selections and hybrids available. One stand-out is the stunning '**Ghost Fern**' which forms 2½-3' high, very upright clumps of frosted silver fronds.

'Brilliance' Autumn Fern *Dryopteris erythrosora*

New fronds emerge a lustrous orange and slowly mature to a deep green on this richly colored selection of our native Autumn Fern. It grows 1½-2' high and 1½' wide in partial shade to shade preferring fairly rich, moist well-drained soil.

Christmas Fern *Polystichum acrostichoides*

Easy to grow, easy to love, our native Christmas Fern is a happy addition to the garden. Growing 1-2' high and wide in partial shade to shade with moist, fairly rich soil. Its polished, dark green, leathery fronds have an open vase-shaped habit. In our climate it is nearly evergreen. In the early spring clip the old foliage away, so you can enjoy the delicate beauty of the new fronds emerging and unfurling. Note: We treat all deciduous and semi-evergreen ferns this way.

Tassel Fern *Polystichum polyblepharum*

Having much in common with its kin, the Christmas Fern (see above), the Tassel Fern has its own special beauty and charm. This vigorous Asian native forms clumps of stiff, arching, lustrous, dark green fronds. We call it "The Glossy, Dressy Fern" and wouldn't be without it.

Rock Cap Fern *Polypodium vulgare*

Low (6-12" high) and spreading but never invasive, this European/Asian native is easy to establish. Give it partial shade to shade and a loose, humus-rich soil. It will reward you with handsome mats of narrowly erect, lance-shaped, evergreen fronds.

Recommended Reading

American Woodland Garden, The. By Rick Darke. Timber Press, Inc. © 2002

Encyclopedia of GARDEN FERNS. By Sue Olsen. Timber Press, Inc. © 2007

Native Ferns, Moss & Grasses. By William Cullina, *New England Wild Flower Society.*
Houghton Mifflin. © 2008

