



Indoor Ferns

Ferns are striking displayed alone as specimens or combined with other houseplants in terrariums, dish gardens and other planters. Their delicate, arching fronds work beautifully when displayed with poinsettias during the winter holidays, combined with cyclamen for Valentine's Day, or as a lush green companion in an outdoor shade container. Because they are so prolific, ferns can easily provide cut greens to combine with flowers or seedpods. If you enjoy making sunprints or collages, papermaking or other crafts, having your own source for pressed ferns is ideal.

tips for happy ferns

There are many varieties of ferns available which are relatively easy to grow. Keep in mind, however, that they do not appreciate neglect in regard to moisture and humidity. Here are some basic care guidelines:

- Unlike their hardy cousins, most tropical ferns enjoy brighter light situations and grow best in the unobstructed light of an east-facing window or a few feet from a west or south-facing window. From November to February, when sunlight is less intense and days are shorter, they can be in the direct light of a west- or south-facing window. Keep them from this direct sun in the summer which will dry out the soil and reduce ambient humidity, causing the leaves to become crispy and brown.
- Providing a cooler room temperature around 65° - 68° is beneficial. Most ferns won't thrive indoors when temperatures dip below 50° or above 78°. Keep them away from fireplaces or heating/air conditioning vents.
- Ferns will require consistent watering and even moisture, and *must* be planted in a container with good drainage. Wait to water again until the soil surface feels dry to the touch. Water gently to avoid getting water on the crown.
- Always continue watering until water flows from the drainage holes. To make sure ferns in hanging baskets are completely hydrated, place in a sink or bathtub so that you can water several times in a row without worrying about overflow.
- High humidity is important: use a humidifier or place pots on trays filled with pebbles and water. Misting may lead to foliar diseases so it is not usually recommended. Ferns with softer leaf surfaces need more humidity than ferns with stiff fronds.
- Some ferns respond well to double potting: plant the fern in a clay pot and place this in a second, larger container lined with moist sphagnum moss. Keep the moss evenly moist to increase humidity without the problems of soggy soil.
- Light feedings of fertilizer once a month from April through September will help produce a lush, robust plant with good foliage color. Water-soluble fertilizers such as Nature's Source (10-4-3) or Jack's Classic Houseplant Special (15-30-15) work well and bi-weekly feeding at half-strength is often recommended.
- There are few pests that bother ferns. They do have some susceptibility to scale insects, mealy bugs and mites. Check your ferns regularly and if you find any pests, try handpicking, spraying with water, or cutting off affected fronds. Ferns are sensitive to pesticide sprays so use a systemic insecticide if there is an infestation – or dispose of the plant.
- Ferns may require re-potting every few years and this should be done in early spring. Overcrowded plants may also be divided. Remove them from their pots and cut carefully between rhizomes, keeping as many leaves as possible for each division. Use Espoma Biotone Starter Plus and your fern divisions will have a better chance of surviving transplant shock.

- Asparagus Fern *Asparagus sprengeri* – Not a true fern, but fernlike, dense and spreading; very popular as a trailer in mixed planters and hanging baskets because it survives just about any conditions including some frost and even much neglect.
- Australian Tree Fern *Sphaeropteriscooperi* (also known as *Cyathea cooperi*) – Striking and elegant, this large fern can be set out for special effect in the summer garden but needs high humidity and special attention indoors. The trunk of the tree fern is formed from its roots so it is advisable to water its trunk as well as the soil.
- Bird’s Nest Fern *Asplenium nidus* – Atypical, upright, glossy, pointed fronds in a funnel-shaped rosette; new fronds are fuzzy brown and look like tiny bird eggs. Large epiphyte with very small roots which may cause instability; use a heavy cachepot rather than repotting, since it prefers being root bound. Likes warmth, filtered light, very moist soil and high humidity but do not mist and be careful not to get water on the leaves or in the rosette when watering in order to prevent foliar diseases.
- Blue Star Fern or Golden Polypody *Phlebodium aureum* – Elongated fronds and a pleasant, blue-green color; an easy-care choice. Another epiphyte, this fern can take lower light, needs a loose, well-draining soil and tolerates drought fairly well.
- Boston Fern *Nephrolepis exaltata* – Extravagantly lush fern with a dense, spreading habit and gracefully arching fronds; old favorite for summer hanging baskets as well as indoor urns. Resilient and very easy to grow, with somewhat more tolerance of direct sun and low humidity than most other ferns. Tends to be messy – trim out broken or dried foliage regularly.
 - *Nephrolepis exaltata* ‘Fluffy Ruffles’ – Smaller Boston Fern with short, stiffly upright fronds with dense, overlapping fluffy leaflets. Likes high humidity but avoid getting water on the crown.
 - *Nephrolepis exaltata* ‘Tiger Fern’ – Boston Fern cultivar with fronds that are striped with cream and pale chartreuse.
- Brake Fern *Pteris ensiformis* – Airy table fern with leaf-like, irregular fronds on stiff stems with a variety of forms and often with white, cream or silver variegation. Easy to grow; responds well to pruning. Allow the soil to dry out slightly before watering; keep in a cooler location with diffused light. Add to dish gardens or use as an accent in outdoor mixed containers.
- Button Fern *Pellaea rotundifolia* – Shiny, dark green, button-like leaflets spaced along arching stems. Prefers a clay pot and well-drained soil; allow the soil to dry out between watering. Likes the controlled environment of a dish garden or terrarium.
- Crocodile Fern *Microsorium musifolium* – Long, ripply fronds that are an intense, dark green and have a leathery texture. Tough fern outdoors or inside; best displayed in a large low pot so its bold, reptilian look may be viewed from above.
- Foxtail Fern *Asparagus densiflorus* – Not a true fern; dense clusters of small leaflets along erect stems give a plume-like appearance. Combines a softening effect with ease of care even in the most difficult situations. Fast-growing and very tough; thrives even when it becomes completely root-bound.
- Heart Leaf Fern *Hemionitis arifolia* – Glossy, deep-green, arrowhead leaves. Attractive and inviting but not for the fainthearted. The trick is to keep moisture levels high without inviting rot, so a terrarium is the easiest solution for this fern.
- Kangaroo Fern/Wart Fern *Microsorium scolopendria* – Easy care fern that is dense and spreading with a decidedly unkempt look. Puckered by spores on their under surfaces, the long, leathery, upright fronds look great in a hanging basket.
- Kimberly Queen/Sword Fern *Nephrolepis cordifolia* – Tall, stiffly pointed fronds that stay upright even in wind and rain; dramatic but easygoing summer outdoor choice. Related to the Boston Fern; can take more sun than other ferns.
- Lemon Buttons *Nephrolepis cordifolia* – Very rounded leaflets on short, upright stems give a full but tidy look. With a similar aesthetic to the more challenging *Pellaea rotundifolia*, but happily quite carefree and easygoing.
- Macho Fern/Broad Sword Fern *Nephrolepis falcata* – Huge fern with a cascading, fountain-like display; dense, spreading and vigorous. Makes a fantastic summer display on porches or part-sun patios, either in large pots or hanging baskets.
- Maidenhair Fern *Adiantum raddianum* ‘Fragrantissima’ – Elegant, arching black stems carry delicate, fan-shaped leaves with a hint of fragrance. Loves strong, indirect light, warmth and high humidity; great choice for double-potting. Do not mist; protect from drafts and heating vents. If it dries out, the foliage will shrivel but new shoots may appear if rehydrated in time.
- East Indian Holly Fern *Arachniodes simplicior* ‘Variegata’ – Easygoing, rhizomatic fern with lustrous, variegated fronds.
- Squirrel’s Foot/Rabbit’s Foot Fern *Davallia trichomanoides/tyermannii* – Epiphyte with brown or white rhizomes that spill over the side of the container; often produces a tactile response. Creeping habit; medium green foliage with a feathery carrot-top look. Looks great in a hanging basket or in a shallow pot placed at eye-level so that the rhizomes may be enjoyed. Allow the soil to dry out slightly before watering and use soft water or let your water sit out overnight.