

Recommended Native Ferns by Region

TOP FERNS FOR THE DEEP SOUTH

John Manion is curator of the Kaul Wildflower Garden at Birmingham Botanical Garden in Alabama. Here are a few of his favorites, chosen for displaying a variety of forms and their suitability to the heat and humidity of the Deep South.

Walking fern (*Asplenium rhizophyllum*)

How wonderful it is to see this fern reproducing via proliferous frond tips, where tiny plantlets form at the terminal end of each frond, which take root to form new plants. The deep green fronds are long and narrow and this species likes lime. It's often seen growing among moss on rock surfaces.

Lowland bladder fern (*Cystopteris protrusa*)

This diminutive fern provides a charming accompaniment to other spring ephemerals, as it emerges early in the season and has a delicate texture. In the South, it will sometimes go dormant in the hottest part of summer, then re-emerge when the weather cools.

Marginal wood fern (*Dryopteris marginalis*)

This understated fern, native to most of the eastern U.S. is one of the easiest to identify, as the sori (pockets of spores) are situated on the pinnae's (leaflets) margins = *marginalis*. A very drought-tolerant fern, it is often found in the wild growing on rock walls and slopes.

Resurrection fern (*Pleopeltis polypodioides*)

This is the fern that lends a “southern look” to our live oaks and many other trees, as it drapes the trees' lower branches. People love the story behind its common

name. It will grow on rocks also, especially with the help of a few dabs of glue.

Southern shield fern (*Thelypteris kunthii*)

This species is a real “work horse” in the garden. It will grow and spread in nearly every location—sun, shade, wet, dry, on slopes...you get the idea. This fern functions well as a groundcover.

TOP FERNS FOR THE NORTHEAST

Bill Cullina is executive director of the Coastal Maine Botanical Garden in Boothbay and author of Native Ferns, Moss & Grasses (Houghton Mifflin, 2008). Among the many native ferns that thrive in the Northeast, here are five that he thinks no garden should be without.

Northern maidenhair (*Adiantum pedatum*)

Northern maidenhair fern has a sophisticated delicacy that belies its toughness and adaptability. The many-fingered arrangement of the fronds is elegant and very distinctive. Given reasonably moist and fertile soil, it grows equally well in partial sun or full shade. Because northern maidenhair takes a season to become established, purchase large, well-rooted plants.

Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrosticoides*)

Like northern maidenhair, this is a strongly clumping species that grows equally well in partial sun as it does in deep shade. In bright light, the narrow, 12- to 16-inch fronds are carried nearly vertically, while in deep shade they splay out horizontally. Christmas fern is moderately drought tolerant and thrives in a wide variety of soils. Expect only

one flush of new leaves each season and, to maintain the fern's vitality, resist the urge to cut off older tattered fronds until they have turned completely brown.

Northern lady fern (*Athyrium filix-femina* var. *angustum*)

Lady fern's soft, doubly divided fronds and neat, clumping habit make it the quintessential woodland garden fern to blend with wildflowers and groundcovers in light shade. If the soil remains moist, it will continue to send forth new fronds all season, maintaining its fresh, spring-green appearance even as many of its companions begin to wither and fade.

Interrupted fern (*Osmunda claytoniana*)

This large, regal fern is restricted primarily to the northeastern U.S. It emerges with remarkable flourish and elegance in early spring, erecting stout, silver-furred fronds “interrupted” by segments of black-green pinnae made so by their burden of millions of spores. It matures into a stately clump three feet high and wide and prefers fertile, moist to wet soil in light shade to partial sun.

Hayscented fern (*Dennstaedtia punctilobula*)

Hayscented fern is an incredibly tough and adaptable species that will grow in rocky, dry, acidic soils with a lushness and vigor that defies all logic. With this said, be warned that hayscented fern is not a fern that plays well with others. At Coastal Maine Botanical Garden, we use it extensively where we need an aggressive, deciduous filler under trees and shrubs in sun or shade.

TOP FERNS FOR THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Richie Steffen is curator of the Elisabeth C. Miller Botanical Garden in Seattle, Washington, and coauthor with Sue Olsen of The Plant Lover's Guide to Ferns (Timber Press, 2015). Here are his recommendations for the Pacific Northwest.

Maidenhair spleenwort (*Asplenium trichomanes*)

This is a splendid, tough and tiny fern

with thin, elegant evergreen fronds six to seven inches long. Found throughout the world in the Northern Hemisphere, the northwestern forms are easy to grow and are perfectly at home tucked into the gaps of our granite and basalt rockeries.

Deer fern (*Blechnum spicant*)

Another fern found throughout the Northern Hemisphere, deer fern attains perfection in the Pacific Northwest. Low, well-mannered mounds of clean, simply divided fronds are topped with upright skeletal fertile fronds that are great for cut floral arrangements. This fern enjoys a constant supply of moisture, but tolerates far less in our gardens.

Leatherleaf polypody (*Polypodium scoleri*)

This lovely evergreen fern is almost always found within sight or sound of the Pacific Ocean, but has adapted well to gardens elsewhere in the Northwest. The thick, heavily-textured fronds can reach 12 inches in length in the garden, but are generally smaller and more compact in the wild.

Western sword fern (*Polystichum munitum*)

This is the trademark fern of the Pacific Northwest. Western sword fern is a stately and resilient fern that matures to a graceful, architectural specimen three to four feet tall and slightly wider. Often thought of as too common by gardeners who are too accustomed to its merits, but if you do not live in the region you lust for its beauty.

Giant chain fern (*Woodwardia fimbriata*)

The giant chain fern is our largest and most spectacular fern. In the wild, fronds can grow as long as 10 feet, but generally reach a restrained four to six feet in the garden. Give it the best soil, rich in organic matter, and plenty of water. The secret to the biggest fronds is to not cut back the old evergreen fronds until the new growth emerges and the old fronds begin to fade.



Northern maidenhair
courtesy of John Ruter, Bugwood.org



Western sword fern
courtesy of Chris Evans, Bugwood.org



Resurrection fern
courtesy of Chris Evans, Bugwood.org