

Flowers, Plants and Things

Outdoor Ferns

By

Carmen Cosentino

A few weeks ago we addressed ferns in the home. They are wonderful way to keep green in our lives. All during the dreary days of winter a house full of ferns will keep the coming spring alive in our minds.

But let's keep that good feeling going as we get into the spring season. Now is the time to plant these wonderful plants. (They are readily available at garden centers and home improvement stores. There are wonderful varieties out there and they thrive in our climate. (A couple of years ago I planted about 15 different varieties in my home landscape and all but two or three not only survived, but thrived.) What makes the ferns so valuable in the home landscape is that most of them thrive in the shade, an area where we often find very few plants that will do well. Too, ferns are more than the usual leafed plant that we are used to, like the Boston fern. The fronds (leaves) vary from that which we are so used to, to some that look like little buttons or, as in the case of the Japanese fern, fronds can be one large unit as wide as 6 inches across and as tall as 3 feet.

Here are some of the best kinds.

Ostrich Fern: Here's one of the truly magnificent ferns from the American woodland. With its very large "vase" shape, Ostrich Ferns create very dramatic looks wherever they grow, often reaching 6 feet in height. They do not spread quickly and are very winter hardy, so they are very useful for the home gardener who wants a large specimen plant. They do best in a partial or fully shaded spot, out of the wind and with a rich soil and ample moisture.

Christmas Fern a true treasure of our American forests. With glossy green fronds that are usually under two feet in length. The long-lasting glossy fronds and the plant's very orderly habit (slow to spread) make it perfect for rich garden accents.

Royal Ferns are deciduous and can grow to be 3-5 feet. They have upright, arching fronds. They will grow in sun to shade. They prefer very acid humus soils that stay moist to wet. Easy to grow.

Wood Fern: Wood ferns are deciduous, they lose their leaves in winter. They grow 1-2 feet tall and have leathery, dark green foliage and look best in clusters of 3-5 plants. They are easy to grow in rich, moist soil.

Lady Fern: Lady Fern grows only about knee high at most, and is always beautiful with lighter green "frilly" ferns. The species needs shade, but is more tolerant of dry conditions than most ferns.

A special note about Fiddleheads. Many of us have heard about them, but surprisingly few have tasted them. The term refers to the unfurled fronds of a young fern. So named because they resemble the carved wood on a violin, fiddleheads are the unfurled shoots of the Ostrich, Cinnamon and Royal ferns. Once they open and start to grow, they become inedible; the best are tightly wrapped and dark green. They are a unique delicacy found in the wild from eastern New York through New England and in Quebec and southern Ontario. And the mystique is furthered by the fact that they are available for only a few short weeks in early spring. They have a delicious intense flavor. Cooked to crunchy tenderness, they are a flavorful and versatile treat. Send me an eMail if you would like a recipe or two.

