

Ferns

During the last few years we have been selling quite a few ferns at the store but we have never really written about them in detail. Our customers are often hesitant to give them a chance, thinking they are difficult to grow. The truth is the ferns we carry today are quite easy to install and keep alive. It is true that most ferns like some shade and a moist environment but they are quite adaptive. I started tallying on-hand varieties and came up with twelve different ferns. These ferns represent a good cross section of what is available in the market today. We have more than twelve varieties on hand but the following are the varieties we have good numbers of.

Athyrium nipponicum 'Apple Court': Crested Japanese Painted Fern. Nice silver and purple markings and 'tufts' of growth on the frond tips distinguish this small fern. It is deciduous and should get 12 to 16 inches tall.

Athyrium filix-femina: Lady Ferns are one of the most widely planted of ferns. They are clump forming and deciduous. The average size is eighteen inches.

Athyrium nipponicum var. Pictum: Japanese silver painted fern. This small fern has the ability to cover a lot of ground if it likes the site. It should be called the Rabbit Fern since it spreads so readily! It does have a silvery sheen to the fronds as the name implies. Its color is best in the spring and early summer. Size is generally in the 10 to 16 inch size.

Athyrium nipponicum var. 'Ghost Fern': Bluish/Grey fronds and an upright growth habit distinguish this fern. It grows fairly tall in a good site, getting up to thirty-six inches in height. This fern forms clumps so you need to split it physically to multiply it. This fern looks great next to dark green shade lovers such as Lenten Rose or Himalayan Sweet Box.

Athyrium angustum forma rubellum 'Lady in Red Fern': A Casa Flora introduction, 'Lady in Red' gets about three feet tall, has red stems and is deciduous. It has a very specific requirement when it comes to fertilization. Do not feed this fern a lot of nitrogen. The nitrogen will generate more chlorophyll which will mask the red color in the stems. Now is the time for me to "plug" Hollytone fertilizer with its 4-3-4 analysis. It is great for ferns.

Dryopteris x australis: 'Dixie Wood Fern....Not for the edge of the woodland garden, Dixie can easily attain a height of four feet plus. This fern is semi-evergreen in zone five. Dixie is a sterile plant and must be reproduced in your garden by division. Japanese or Autumn ferns usually need a lot of room but this one is somewhat refined in growth.

Matteuccia struthiopteris 'Jumbo': Jumbo ostrich fern is an understatement! This fern colonizes nicely in our area of the Piedmont. We planted one in a semi-shade garden three years ago that is now covering about twenty-five square feet. It is not invasive, the rhizomes are shallow and easy to remove if you want to keep it somewhat refined in growth habit. The specific plant mentioned above is growing on the north side of a wall with no supplemental water being applied.

Polystichum polyblepharum, 'Tassel Fern': Artificial looking is what people say about this fern when they see it growing in a garden. It is probably best described as a glossy evergreen fern with beautiful rounded form. Tassel gets about eighteen inches high and must be spread by division. Good for small areas.

Dryopteris erythrosora 'Brilliance': The Autumn fern is our number one seller. The cultivar 'Brilliance' has absolutely gorgeous fronds that emerge a beautiful shade of copper. In our area of North Carolina they can hold this color well into the winter. It is a good colonizer but not invasive. Most sources give it a maximum height of 24 inches but we have seen some healthy specimens get up to 30 inches.

Dryopteris dilatata, Jimmy Dyces's Broad Wood Fern: That is a mouthful of name. The wide fronds on this plant are bluish in color and somewhat upright in growth habit. This fern gets very large and requires a huge well prepared hole to match. Leaf compost, soil conditioner and cow manure equally blended and added to the soil will enable this plant to attain a height of over three feet. It is deciduous and does like supplemental water during dry periods to keep the fern looking fresh.

Polystichum 'Acrostichoides: The Christmas Fern is another must have plant. It is evergreen, colonizes very well and is native to much of our great country. The average height is one to two feet. This fern does well on dry shade banks as well as wet ones.

Polystichum setiferum 'Herrenhausen': Soft shield ferns have a light airy appearance to them as the fronds are pale green and yes, they are soft to the touch. They are listed as semi-evergreen but ours in the cold frame are still green. They will grow to a height of 24 inches on average.