

## Why Grow ferns

Many people think that ferns, are difficult to grow, or that they can only be grown in damp and shady places. Both of these ideas could not be further from the truth. One of the greatest advantages of ferns as garden plants, is that in many cases they require next to no care at all, and that this is of only the very simplest sort. While at the same time, there are ferns that can be grown on the highest mountains, in the driest deserts, on wall tops, in sun or shade, or even on the bottom of ponds, in fact virtually anywhere.

## Planting

There are only a couple of things to remember about planting them.

Firstly, though it is not possible to give hints on planting every type of fern individually, but here are some general points that should get you started.

Though many of the tougher types of fern especially, will tolerate almost any soil, generally speaking most ferns require an open free draining soil if they can get it. The reason for this is that ferns have many fine fibrous roots, rather than woody taproots, and these find it much easier to penetrate an open loose soil, which is not waterlogged, than a dense or very wet one, with the exception Wetland and Bog ferns of course.

For these reasons it is best to prepare the ground for ferns, by mixing in with the soil, plenty of materials like, leaf mould, shredded bark, garden compost, well-rotted farmyard manure (which includes animal bedding), and even gravel or grit on the heavier soils. It is best to avoid fresh manure however, as the fine roots can be sensitive to strong fertilizer, and will die back if over fertilized either artificially or organically. This however is one of the big advantages of growing ferns. For as they do not flower or make seed, they have very small needs for food, or light etc. and therefore can get by in some very difficult places indeed.

## When to plant ferns

The second thing to remember is that, it is best not to move ferns in the winter or dormant season. This is mainly because of those fine roots again, which do not have great reserves of strength and can therefore easily suffer damage through cold, dry, waterlogging, or severing of the growing points, in winter. Which means they will not be able to start work or growth again in the spring, just when the plant needs them most. The best planting time for ferns therefore is during the growing season, April to October and the months between.

How to plant.

Plant deeply to avoid rocking but do not get soil in the centre of the crown, as it can rot the crown. Insure that the soil is close round the root ball, and if needs be, tease out and spread the roots a little, but do not firm the soil as hard as you would if planting as shrub. After planting water in well, then water once or twice a week through the rest of the first growing season if it is dry, but stop in autumn to avoid waterlogging in the winter. In future years ferns should not need any watering except in very severe droughts.

## Where to plant ferns.

Almost all ferns will enjoy a very heavy degree of shade indeed, especially when compared with other garden plants. Though naturally they will not grow in complete darkness, but it is always worth a try of a few in the gardens really dark corners, just to see. It is best however to avoid putting the taller woodland types where there are likely to be strong winds, as they can be killed by burning and rocking. But most of the shorter, spreading and alpine types are more than tolerant of even the strongest winds. It is best however, to avoid planting them directly on top of tree roots, and if you do plant in mature woodland, then it is a good idea to make a large hole and fill it with loose materials, in order to give the ferns a good start, before they have to compete with the tree roots.

## Maintenance.

This is the good bit, ferns need very little maintenance at all, in fact we can divide maintenance into three groups.

1. For the really lazy gardener. If you plant the larger woodland types of fern, or any of the smaller ferns listed as tough, in books catalogues. Then they will probably be happy to live and increase in size slowly, without outgrowing their space for many years/decades, with no care at all.
2. For the slightly tidy gardener. You may like to tidy away any dead/untidy fronds in spring, say, early May, if you wish.
3. For the real enthusiast. Ferns really like a mulch now and again, ideally on top of the soil and in spring again. You may use anything except strong manure, i.e. leafmold, garden compost, composted bark even grit. They do not need lots of fertilizer, nor do they usually need dividing, though you may try reinvigorating a really old clump if you wish. Just split it apart with two forks and replant in spring, if you really must.

And that's all there is to it.