

GROWING FERNS IN THE HOME



Ferns can do well in indoor living spaces, despite them having a reputation for being one of the 'trickier' houseplants. If you want a fern in your house, do a bit of research first. Have an idea of where you want to keep your fern. Is it a heated living room, humid bathroom or cool porch? Is the environment constant or are there big fluctuations in temperature and humidity? In winter, the biggest factor that causes problems is central heating, which can produce very dry heat. Although the temperature may be fairly constant, the humidity may fluctuate widely, and this will affect the rate at which the plant loses water. In summer, modern UK houses typically don't have air conditioning, allowing temperatures to soar in sunny rooms. Finally, lack of air circulation can cause humidity problems

throughout the year. Look online or in gardening books to see what sort of fern would suit your chosen site. Then head for the garden centre!

Buying a fern

When buying a fern, look for a healthy plant that is not completely pot-bound. Many will have been grown in large, automated glasshouses with artificial light, controlled watering, humidity and fertilisation. They can take a little time to adjust to a domestic environment. Check the plant that you buy is in damp compost and water it when you get home. You may need to repot your fern almost immediately. Many growers use the minimum size of pot to reduce the quantity of compost and the weight, which allows for cheaper transport. Most plants that die do so in the first few days or weeks. If you can, try to get the accurate name of the fern that you have bought. Many are sold as 'Fern' or 'Pteris', neither of which give you sufficient information to be able to look in a book or on the Internet for further advice. Equally, if you already know what fern you want, make sure that the plant you are buying looks like the photo you have seen. Many ferns are sold under wrong or outdated names.



Pteris growing in a living room.



Nephrolepis growing in a bathroom.

Positioning your fern

Generally, ferns require a light place without direct sunlight. Any direct sun, even for short periods, can quickly scorch the fronds. If you are placing ferns in dark corners, you will have to supplement the light artificially. Small species may be happy in indoor terrariums with artificial lighting.

Many indoor ferns benefit from being put outside for the summer after any risk of frost has passed. Choose a place that is shady, not windy and where you can water them easily. Don't rely on there being enough rain to avoid hand watering! Bring the ferns indoors again around the end of September and check for any pests which have set up home in the plant or in the pot.

Humidity and watering

The key to growing a wide range of ferns is being able to create a consistent humid environment. A moist microenvironment can be created around a plant by standing the pot on a surface of wet gravel, bark or terracotta pellets. Frequent spraying with a hand spray can help too. Although ferns like humidity, most prefer regular watering and free drainage rather than standing in water. They should be watered

when the compost begins to feel only just damp. If a plant becomes too dry and wilts, then spray it, stand it in a tray of water for 24 hours, away from sunlight, and then let it drain well. It may recover.

Repotting a fern

When you need to repot a fern, use a good quality potting compost that drains well. Do not use garden soil, which is usually too heavy. The addition of chipped bark, sold as orchid compost, will lighten and improve the drainage of any compost mix. Do not try to 'fluff-up' the roots when repotting as ferns have very fine fibrous roots that can break off easily.

Pest and problems

In general, ferns are not troubled by pests. However, slugs and snails can damage them and can come into the home in the compost. If snail trails are seen, then look under the pot and in any crevices for the culprit. Slug pellets may be necessary and should be used sparingly and away from animals, birds and children. Aphids can also be a problem, either black aphids or greenfly. Usually, these are on the underside of the fern fronds and may only be evident by sticky 'honeydew' secreted by the aphid onto the surfaces below the affected fronds. Treatment with an insecticidal powder, such as ant or wasp powder is best, as liquid spray insecticides may damage the plant.



Greenfly infestation on a frond.

Choosing the right fern

Nephrolepis, *Phlebodium* and *Davallia* do well indoors and are commonly available in garden centres. Many fancy cultivars can be found that have been bred to have a special appearance. These ferns naturally grow in trees and on rocks where they have less water, increased air movement and lower humidity and so usually cope well with the conditions in most modern homes. Maidenhair Ferns (*Adiantum* species) require to be kept damper, thriving in a cooler room with higher humidity. *Pteris* species don't like to dry out and are one of the few ferns that do best standing in a saucer of water. *Asplenium* species require excellent drainage but also don't like to dry out. Both *Pteris* and *Asplenium* do best in cooler rooms. Some ferns are happiest when growing in hanging baskets and can occasionally tolerate a couple of weeks without water. One of these is the Staghorn Fern, *Platyserium bifurcatum*, which can hang in a kitchen or light bathroom. It will tolerate some direct sunlight in early morning and late afternoon, but it won't tolerate midday summer sun. Another fern that does very well in a basket is *Drynaria coronans*, often sold as 'Snake Fern'. However, be warned, this fern can get very large with fronds over 1 m long! We also list three ferns that do well in a closed terrarium.

Easier to grow



Blue Star Fern
Phlebodium aureum



Boston Fern
Nephrolepis exaltata



White Rabbit's Foot Fern
Davallia griffithiana

Extra care needed



Maidenhair Fern
Adiantum raddianum



Tricolor Brake Fern
Pteris normalis



Mother Fern
Asplenium x parvati

Ideal for hanging baskets



Staghorn Fern
Platycerium bifurcatum



Snake Fern
Drynaria coronans



Monarch Fern
Microsorium scolopendria

Suitable for terrariums



Krauss's Spikemoss
Selaginella kraussiana



Heart Fern
Parahemionitis arifolia



Asian Water Fern
Bolbitis heteroclita

The Exotic Fern Group is a community for enthusiasts of tropical, subtropical and indoor ferns. We bring together individuals who share a passion for these unique plants, offering opportunities to connect, learn and grow together. Members enjoy regular newsletters, social visits to private fern collections and online presentations. We also organise trips to larger public fern collections. Members can also benefit from access to fern and spore swap schemes, to expand and develop their own collections.

Join the community for free!

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Version 2

ISBN 978-1-917669-10-8
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