

EXOTIC FERNS IN THE GARDEN



There are many exotic ferns that will happily grow in the garden. Some indoor and glasshouse ferns are also glad to spend the summer months in the garden. This benefits the fern in reducing insect pests and in producing strong growth in natural daylight. Exotic ferns can be used together with native and temperate ferns to create an attractive and unusual exotic display.

You can also keep ferns outside in pots. This makes it easy to protect less hardy species: to give them winter protection or allow them to be brought indoors as frosts approach.

Potting and planting in the garden

Most exotic ferns outside require protection from direct sunlight during the hottest hours of the day. This is particularly the case when they are first planted out, as the fronds may be burnt, until they become acclimatised. They also require moisture, so avoid positions where they will not get rain or cannot be watered, especially if they are in pots. Do not put them in very windy places as they will dry out very quickly. Some ferns will grow in drier places, but you need to choose the right species.

Depending on your soil type, most ferns in the garden will benefit from improvement to the soil structure, such as adding compost or a little grit for drainage. Most ferns will not like being waterlogged, particularly over the winter months. The best substrate for ferns in pots is light, moisture retentive but free draining. Use a good quality peat-free compost as your base, but mix in some loam and some grit.

Watering

If your fern is planted out in the garden, depending on the species and soil-type, they may only need additional watering in the driest of summers. However, most potted ferns need to be kept moist but not



Exotic ferns in a walled garden.



Hanging baskets of *Davallia* and *Microsorium*.

wet. Rainwater is the best water to use. However, in times of drought, any water is better than no water, and you may have to use the mains supply. Keep the watering routine simple, especially if you need help when you are away from home.

Some fern species that are planted out can be prone to rot easily and will not tolerate winter wet. They should have protection from rain during the cold weather, and ideally be planted in very free draining substrate. These include the silvery 'xeric' ferns such as *Myriopteris tomentosa* and *Pyrrosia sheareri*.

Winter protection

Some subtropical ferns will survive light frosts and can be planted permanently in the ground if given some winter protection in the form of horticultural fleece or cloches. Whilst mulching will protect the crowns of some ferns, those with superficial rhizomes, such as *Pyrrosia* species, will not like having the rhizome buried. If you are uncertain of the hardiness of an exotic fern, err on the side of bringing it into the greenhouse, if you have one, for the winter. It is not just the depth of frost that can kill a plant, it is also the length of time that the frost persists.

Pests

Deer and rabbits can be indiscriminate in their eating habits and cause a lot of damage to both emerging and mature fern fronds. Squirrels and wood pigeons can also break off emerging fronds but seldom damage mature growth.

In common with native ferns, exotic ferns are reasonably immune to insect attack when placed outdoors. Aphids, that can be a significant pest indoors, are only a minor problem in the garden. More significant is the damage that can be caused by slugs and snails. Whilst slug pellets may be used safely in the glasshouse, it is best to avoid them outdoors where birds and other animals may eat them. Try using a biological nematode control. Place pots on clean surfaces and, if damage is seen, do a midnight hunt with a torch to find the culprits.

Adult vine weevils may also leave characteristic notches in the edge of the fronds and the larvae can eat the roots and kill the plant. A proprietary vine weevil killer may be needed. Be aware that some products can damage emerging fronds and cause distortion. If the compound is systemically active, application to the roots alone may avoid some damage.



Ferns planted on a sloped bed.

Choosing the right fern

Before you purchase or plant your exotic fern in the garden, assess the area that you are planting. Is the ground dry, moist or wet? How much direct sun does it receive? Do you want a statuesque fern or ground cover? There are exotic ferns for most conditions, and they will do well if planted in the right place. For a large fern, consider *Parablechnum chilense* for dryish areas, *Polystichum munitum* for moist conditions and *Woodwardia fimbriata* for wettish areas. All keep their foliage throughout the winter. Smaller ferns include *Dryopteris erythrosora* and *Blechnum appendiculatum*, both have marvellous colour in their new fronds in the spring. *Austroblechnum penna-marina* is a good slow-growing evergreen ground cover fern, as is *Adiantum tibeticum* (often sold as *A. venustum*) which is deciduous. *Drynaria baronii* can be grown in the ground or in a pot and retains its attractive dead foliage throughout the winter. The Japanese Painted Ferns (*Anisocampium niponicum*, often sold as *Athyrium*) are colourful additions to the garden and need light for the colour to fully develop, whilst avoiding direct midday sun as they burn easily. They are fully deciduous and disappear in the winter.

Evergreen ferns



Autumn Fern
Dryopteris erythrosora



Chilean Hard Fern
Parablechnum chilense



Western Sword Fern
Polystichum munitum

Ferns useful for ground cover



Maidenhair Fern
Adiantum tibeticum



Hammock Fern
Blechnum appendiculatum



Alpine Water Fern
Austroblechnum penna-marina

Ferns suitable for drier conditions



Woolly Lip Fern
Myriopteris tomentosa



Oak Leaf Fern
Drynaria baronii



Button Fern
Paraceterach rotundifolia

Ferns suitable for wetter conditions



Sensitive Fern
Onoclea sensibilis



Japanese Painted Fern
Anisocampium niponicum



Giant Chain Fern
Woodwardia fimbriata

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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