



Dryopteris are Favorite Ferns for the Shade Garden

Fossil impressions suggest that ferns have been on the planet for more than 100 million years. Today there are about 12,000 species of ferns – most of them found in tropical rainforests.

We may have many less species than those found in the rainforest for our own shady gardens, but with the family of Dryopteris alone, we have an abundance of beautiful, reliable ferns from which to choose.

The genus Dryopteris contains the largest number of ferns for our gardens. They are generally easy-to-grow, dependable plants that make few demands of the gardener. If asked, they would request a site in filtered sunlight all day, with moist woodland soil full of organic matter. And, although ferns in the Dryopteris family perform satisfactorily in spots that receive some direct sunlight, they would prefer some protection from the hot afternoon sun.

Autumn Ferns

The colorful fronds of Autumn fern (Dryopteris erythrosora) emerge coppery red, turn bronze as they expand, become shiny

green as the season progresses, and blush with copper again in the fall. New fronds continue to grow throughout the summer extending the show of color. Autumn ferns grow 18-24" tall. Once established, autumn ferns are drought tolerant.

Brilliance Autumn fern (Dryopteris erythrosora 'Brilliance') is a showy fern with four-season interest. Young fronds begin coppery bronze in spring, turn glossy green as they mature, turn bronze again in fall, and then remain evergreen well into winter.



Male Ferns

Male ferns (Dryopteris filix-mas) are native to rocky woods in western and northeastern North America. They were given the common name male fern because of their masculine, robust

character. These adaptable, deciduous ferns can even tolerate nearly full sun if they have ample soil moisture.

The ends of the fronds of Crispa Cristata male fern are very frilly, giving the fern a lovely textured, fringed appearance. This dwarf form of the male fern only grows 12-24" making it a good choice for the front of a shady border.

Can you guess what the fronds of Parsley male fern resemble? If you guessed the fronds look like the dark green and crinkled leaves of parsley, you are right. This vigorous grower reaches 18-24" tall and is an excellent choice for massing.

Goldie's Fern

Another native to northeastern North America, often found near water in cool woods, Goldie's fern (Dryopteris goldiana) is one of the tallest ferns for a sheltered spot in the garden. Shaggy fiddleheads are a highlight of the spring shade garden. Broad, leathery, bright green fronds turn pale yellow in the fall. Goldie's fern creeps slowly by rhizomes, gradually forming a clump of slightly arching foliage up to 4' tall.

Leather Wood Fern

A common fern native to the woods, ravines, and rocky slopes of northeastern North America, Leather wood fern (*Dryopteris marginalis*) is a vigorous garden fern. Slightly arching fronds unfurl yellow green, darken to blue green by summer, and remain evergreen well into winter. Leather wood ferns grow 12-24" tall.

Remote Wood Fern

Remote wood fern, also called Scaly Buckler fern, (*Dryopteris remota*) is an excellent fern for a woodland setting. It emerges

early in a bright flush of light green foliage.

The widely-arching, delicate-textured fronds grow 2-3' tall. The remote wood fern is very hardy and adaptable to most conditions. Toothed wood fern (*Dryopteris spinulosa*) grows 18-30" tall with deeply divided, glossy green fronds that turn yellow in the fall. Plant toothed wood fern where its delicate fronds have some protection from the wind. Its lacy foliage mixes well with large-leaved perennials.

Toothed Wood Fern

Top out at 2' are fine companions for lady's mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*), Chinese forget-me-not (*Brunnera macrophylla*), mid-sized hostas, and foamflowers (*Tiarella*). Small ferns are excellent neighbors to barrenwort (*Epimedium*), small hostas, and lungwort (*Pulmonaria*).

Garden Companions

Ferns mingle well with large or coarse-foliaged perennials. Tall ferns are good comrades for large hostas, golden-ray (*Ligularia*), and Rodger's flower (*Rodgersia*). Ferns that top out at 2' are fine companions for lady's mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*), Chinese forget-me-not (*Brunnera macrophylla*), mid-sized hostas, and foamflowers (*Tiarella*). Small ferns are excellent neighbors to barrenwort (*Epimedium*), small hostas, and lungwort (*Pulmonaria*).