

## Fabulous Ferns

By Kate O'Lenic, Master Gardener (published 4/13/2024)

Let's throw some light on a shady subject – ferns! We have a wealth of native ferns with amazing variety in size, shape, color, and texture. Most grow in shade but there are a few that like sunlight. The choices are amazing! Here's a chart of native ferns that you might find interesting: <https://secure.caes.uga.edu/extension/publications/files/html/B987-2/B987-2-web-chart.pdf>. You can also find details and photographs of many native ferns at: <https://tnyards.utk.edu/category/native-plants/ferns/>.

Before we dig deeper here are some basics about ferns. Ferns are ancient plants, dating back approximately 200 million years. There are estimated to be 380 native species of ferns in the U.S and 24 species listed in “Landscaping with Native Plants – East Tennessee,” <https://www.tnipc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/landscaping-east-tn.pdf>. Ferns are flowerless and reproduce by spores rather than seeds. Their leaves are called fronds. Part of the beauty of fronds is that they can be full or finely divided, almost lacy looking.

There are several native ferns that are evergreen, and others that are deciduous. Colors range from dark to light green. Some have beautiful fall color. The cinnamon fern is so-called because of a central spike that is the color of a cinnamon stick. It makes quite the statement in a garden. And remember the variety of textures found among our native ferns. A shade garden can have that wow factor with the variety of ferns available.

You can grow many ferns in containers indoors or plant them outdoors. To grow ferns indoors, they'll need humidity, appropriate light, and cool temperatures. Humidity can be provided by a humidifier or by using place pots in trays with gravel and water. The water level should be low enough that the bottom of the pot does not touch the water. Misting periodically will also help. The gravel may need to be replaced or washed about every 3 months to prevent algae growth. The amount of light depends on the variety of fern and varies from full shade to sun.

The container should be about 1 inch wider than the root ball and have bottom drainage holes. You can add gravel or pottery shards to the bottom to keep the drainage holes open, add potting medium to the bottom, then pull the root ball apart, spread the roots out and place in the container, making sure the crown is not covered by soil. Gently firm the soil in and water.

The potting medium varies with the fern being planted. In all cases, it should drain well, be rich with organic matter, and hold water well, but not excessively. See “Growing Ferns,” for more details about potting mediums.

[https://secure.caes.uga.edu/extension/publications/files/pdf/B%20737\\_6.PDF](https://secure.caes.uga.edu/extension/publications/files/pdf/B%20737_6.PDF)

Growing hardy ferns outdoors requires the right amount of sun or shade, rich soil, and plenty of water during the growing season. Fertilizer can be applied sparingly in the spring. Ferns are sensitive to excess fertilization. Mulching with leaves or pine straw works well and mimics the forest environment in which ferns naturalize.

Ferns are generally slow-growing and may take 2 to 3 years to reach mature size. It may also be necessary to divide ferns every 3 to 5 years. It's a great way to get free ferns!

Got shade? Add ferns! Cheers!

### **More Information Sources**

“Celebrating Wildflowers – Ferns,” USDA, U.S. Forest Service,  
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/wildflowers/beauty/ferns/index.shtml>.

“Hardy Ferns Factsheet HGIC 1176,” Clemson Cooperative Extension,  
<https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/hardy-ferns/>

### **How do I ask a question?**

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at [www.netmga.net](http://www.netmga.net). Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

**FREE Presentation** Dr. Doug Tallamy is the T. A. Baker Professor of Agriculture in the Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Delaware. He is a leader in native plant horticulture. He will present “Learn more about nature gardening”.

**May 6, 2024, 6:30pm EST**

Register at:

<https://tennessee.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZ0uc-qspz0pHdSx0-0v-Xfo3sSWPDiT7hnx>