

Ferns Are Deer-Resistant

By Susan Camp

Several years ago, I planted Sedum 'Autumn Joy' in two large pots, one on either side of our entrance. They were lovely through three seasons and lived there happily for several years until the deer discovered them and munched them down to nubs.

I searched for several months for replacement plants and finally decided on soft shield ferns (*Polystichum setiferum*). I purchased them as native North American ferns, but they actually are native to Southern Europe, although one source lists the ferns as native to Alaska. If so, technically, the seller was correct. The lovely ferns are semi-evergreen to evergreen, but will need the old fronds cut back this month to make way for new growth. The feathery fronds grow outward from the center, giving the plants a "whirlwind" effect. The best part is that they have proven to be deer-resistant.

Ferns date back about 360 million years; an estimated 11,000 species of ferns exist today. Ferns predate seed-bearing plants and reproduce from spores, which they produce and drop by the millions. Spore cases can be observed as brown dots on the undersides of leaves. For a detailed explanation of the fern reproductive cycle, see "About Ferns" on The American Fern Society website.

Most ferns are found in tropical and sub-tropical climates, particularly in shady woodlands. Most cannot survive in cool, dry, mountainous environments.

Ferns are non-flowering plants, but in the spring curled baby fronds, called fiddleheads or croziers, after a bishop's crook, appear. Fiddleheads of certain species were traditionally eaten in springtime, but research indicates that many species may be toxic or carcinogenic.

Fern species range in size from a few inches to massive tree ferns up to 80 feet tall. There are even climbing varieties. Japanese Climbing Fern (*Lygodium japonicum*) is an Asian and Australian native, introduced to Florida in the 1930's as an ornamental. It spread quickly, smothering trees and native plants. It is a persistent invader in the Lower South, according to "A Field Guide for the Identification of Invasive Plants in Southern Forests."

Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), a toxic fern, is considered a weed in many countries. It is found from Virginia to Alabama and Kentucky. Bracken grows from strong underground rhizomes in open fields and moorland and is difficult to eradicate.

The publication "Native Plants for Southeast Virginia including Hampton Roads Region" includes information on several native ferns suitable for planting on the Middle Peninsula. All require rich, moist, well-drained, acidic soil in a shady location. Most selections have no serious disease or insect pest problems, require low maintenance, and are deer-resistant. These ferns are excellent replacements for invasive groundcovers like creeping liriopse, English ivy, and vinca and also grow well in pots.

Southern lady fern (*Athyrium asplenoides*) is a deciduous perennial with delicate, arching, light-green fronds and dark-red leaf stalks at maturity. Fiddleheads appear until frost. Lady fern tolerates rabbits and deer. It can spread aggressively.

Royal fern (*Osmunda spectabilis*) is a tall, erect deciduous perennial with pink leaflets that change to bright green, becoming yellow or brown in the fall. The stalks are green to wine-colored. Fuzzy fiddleheads appear in early spring. Royal fern tolerates wet soil and brief flooding. Rabbits and deer rarely cause damage.

Cinnamon fern (*Osmundastrum cinnamomeum*) fossils date back to 75 to 180 million years ago. Erect, fertile fronds that mature from green to red-brown are followed by sterile, yellow-green fronds. Fall color is a stunning gold to burnt-orange. Fiddleheads are covered with woolly hairs. Cinnamon fern provides food for some insects and protective covering for birds

Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) is an evergreen perennial with leathery, dark green lance-shaped fronds. It grows in a circular cascade. Emerging fiddleheads are covered with silvery scales. Christmas fern dislikes wet, clay soil.

Ferns provide color and textural interest in shady areas or containers. They contrast well with other shade plants like hostas and hellebores. Dainty, curled fiddleheads welcome in the spring. The best part is that most ferns are deer-resistant.

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