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A frondness for ferns

Colin Moat

Fig. 1 *Polystichum setiferum* Plumosomultilobum Group

I can't quite remember when I first fell for ferns; they sort of crept up on me. I'd kept them at arm's length, I suspect, due to being slightly intimidated by their confusing botanical, and even more jumbled common names. Feedback from other plantspeople suggests I'm not alone. I wonder whether this is what drew educated Victorians to pteridology; perhaps they enjoyed adding to and embellishing fern names.

I bit the bullet when I decided to shift the nursery towards the shady end of the plant spectrum. In fact, it was probably more a case of finally admitting that the majority of plants I had selected for the nursery were shade-lovers. I've always been drawn to plants with interesting foliage, a long season of interest, toughness

and cold-hardiness. I soon realised that a great many ferns meet all of these requirements and so, slowly but surely, I expanded the range of ferns I offered for sale.

Of all the plants that I offer, ferns are the one group about which people ask the most questions, and seek the most advice. So, based on what I've learned to date, I've put together a short list of ferns that I think provide a good basis on which to build a collection, and some that I wouldn't want to be without. But I'm starting with some trepidation because, although I've been offering ferns for a decade or so, I'm well aware that there is still much I have to learn about them.

I've only addressed the five most commonly found groups of ferns, and not in

any particular order. The first four of these are mostly 'wintergreen' (not always so in severe winters), but they may not end up looking their best in spring, and it's worth cutting the old fronds back at this time, so you can see the magic happen when the basal 'knuckles' unfurl.

It's also worth pointing out that you don't actually need an area of cultivated ground to grow ferns, as most of them do really well in pots outdoors, and once established are pretty tolerant of random watering regimes.

Asplenium

Asplenium scolopendrium (30-60cm¹) has several common names, the best-known of which is probably the hart's tongue fern (affectionately known as 'Scollies' in the fern fraternity). Its strappy

¹ Plant heights are only approximate, as they depend so much on environmental conditions.

Fig. 2 *Asplenium scolopendrium*Fig. 3 *Asplenium trichomanes*Fig. 4 *Polystichum polyblepharum*

leaves make it possibly the most recognisable of ferns; certainly it's one of the toughest (fig. 2). You can see it growing in walls, cracks and crevices, in sun or shade. So when I'm asked for a plant for dry shade, this one is top of the list. It also comes in lots of forms, which allowed the Victorians full rein in adding descriptors for the likes of (reading from *Stearn's Dictionary of Plant Names for Gardeners*) *Asplenium scolopendrium* Cristatum Group (crested), *A. s.* 'Furcatum' (forked), *A. s.* Undulatum Group (frilly edges), all of which add to the decorative value of this species.

Maintenance after establishment, as you might have guessed, is minimal: benign neglect is probably better than overwatering, and cut back old fronds in March. They are not overly keen on very acid soils (hence their affinity with mortar).

Commonly known as maidenhair spleenwort, among other names, *Asplenium trichomanes* (10-30cm) is another in the genus, widely available (fig. 3). This one too is often found in walls etc, enjoying good drainage and light shade, and not always needing a spring tidy either, although this does improve its appearance. As a bonus, it will take full sun as well.

Polystichum

With the common name of soft shield fern, *Polystichum setiferum* (60-120cm) is a British native. It's another fern that tolerates dry shade, once established. It can take a fair bit of sun too, provided it gets enough water. One summer in my garden on the Greensand Ridge, its fronds went crisp and dropped after about nine weeks without water, but it sent out new ones when we finally had rain again. Furthermore, though I was not complicit in this exercise, I have just witnessed big clumps being hacked out of my son's garden and replanted elsewhere, and I'm pretty sure it will survive as it is almost bomb-proof.

It has a classic dissected frond: as they unfurl, the young fronds are like little lights with white furry tips (setiferum meaning 'bearing bristles', eg fig. 1). There are a number of selected forms worth looking for. The excellent *Polystichum setiferum* (Divisilobum Group)

'Herrenhausen' (60-90cm) opens in a tight whorl of divided, lobed plumes. Also worth a search are the *P. s.* Cristatum Group forms, and the smaller *P. s.* Congestum Group selections, among many others.

One of my favourites is the Japanese tassel fern, *Polystichum polyblepharum* (45-90cm) from the Far East (figs 4 & 5). It has beautiful, shiny-bright young fronds, with feather-shaped leaflets on an exceptionally lustrous, oval, spear-shaped leaf. They do require some moisture to be at their best, but are brilliant for brightening up dark corners.

Dryopteris

There are a great many highly garden-worthy forms of these, mainly of the scaly male fern, species *Dryopteris affinis*, and the variously (and confusingly) named male, golden or shield fern species *D. filix-mas*. But I'm going to limit myself to a couple of personal favourites among those I grow.

Dryopteris dilatata is also a species with many varieties, among which I am especially keen on the broad buckler fern, *D. d.* 'Crispa Whiteside' (up to 60cm – fig. 6). It prefers acidic soils, but is another in the unfussy, bomb-proof category. In my book the fronds are rather boringly described as 'broadly triangular crisped', but this doesn't really do justice to



Fig. 5 *P. polyblepharum* fronds

their delicate, well-spaced, character-full shape.

The well-named rosy buckler fern, *D. erythrosora* (60-90cm) from the Far East is in contention to be my favourite. Its young fronds



Fig. 6 *Dryopteris dilatata* 'Crispa Whiteside'

emerge reddish-bronze, and are reassuringly recognisable from a distance, which is not common in ferns (figs 7 & 8). The species name comes from *erythro* (red) *sora* (sori – spore cases).



Fig. 7 *Dryopteris erythrosora*

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Fig. 8 *D. erythrosora* frond

Polypodium

I'm very much a latecomer to this next genus of ferns, which is a little embarrassing as the National Collection holder lives only about five miles away! It was when I saw Julian Reed's display at Great Dixter about five years ago that they really caught my attention. The scientific name of the common polypody, *Polypodium vulgare* (10-45cm) comes from Greek this time, 'poly'

meaning many and 'podion' meaning little foot, referring to its creeping habit. While I wouldn't advocate these being placed in too sunny a spot, like a number of ferns, they can tolerate a fair bit of sunshine if they get enough moisture.

P. vulgare is evergreen (fig. 9). It prefers neutral to acid soil, but determinedly covers the ground in a useful, not thuggish way. It is a real tough cookie, and can even be found growing on trees. A good cultivar is *P. v.* 'Bifidocristatum', which has deeply divided, crested fronds.

Also tough is *Polypodium cambricum*, which has a preference for a higher pH and is summer-dormant (making it very drought-tolerant, even under my magnolias), and producing a fresh new flush of foliage in late autumn. It will look good through the winter. There is a softness to its fronds too. *P. c.* 'Richard Kayse' is a good one to look for; it has broader fronds and is sterile.

Fig. 9 *Polypodium vulgare*Fig. 10 *Athyrium filix-femina*
'Dre's Dagger'Fig. 11 *A. niponicum* var. *pictum*
'Regal Red'

Athyrium

I always think of these as the extroverts of the fern world, offering an amazing colour range during late spring and summer but then, in autumn when the going gets tough, retiring for a little lie-down in a darkened fern bed, to rest over winter.

Most varieties are of the lady ferns, species *Athyrium filix-femina* (20-45cm), widely distributed in the temperate northern hemisphere.



Fig. 12 *A. n.* 'Pearly White'

From these I am particularly attracted to *A. f.* 'Dre's Dagger', with slender fronds cresting at the top (fig. 10); and the popular, slender tating fern (the name comes from the Victorian lace industry), *A. f.* 'Frizelliae', with very distinctive, tiny alternate leaflets up the stem.

There are some spectacular named forms of another well-populated species, the Japanese painted fern *A. niponicum* (30-60cm), from the Far East. Rather than clump up, these ferns run gently via stolons. *A. n.* var. *pictum* 'Apple Court' is a nicely crested form with

a silvery overlay to the olive-coloured leaves, and burgundy stems. Other varieties to look for, with good foliage colour, are *A. n.* var. *pictum* 'Regal Red' (fig. 11) and *A. n.* 'Pearly White' (fig. 12 – no translation required!).

I can't leave *Athyrium* without mentioning *A.* 'Ghost', a cross between *A. filix-femina* and *A. niponicum*, with beautifully graceful, muted silvery-white fronds (fig. 13). It has hybrid vigour, is more upright than either parent, and is surprisingly drought-tolerant; definitely on my favourites list.



Fig. 13 *Athyrium* 'Ghost'



Fig. 14 Frosted dryopteris frond

There is a price to pay with all athyriums though. In comparison to most of the above, they do have slight primadonna tendencies. They won't thrive in sun, nor too dry a

soil. High maintenance, but worth it!

There are many other ferns I could rave about, but if I haven't lost you by now, you are probably looking longingly at the kettle. So in

conclusion, I would suggest that you persevere with ferns. They are a valuable asset to shady parts of any garden, and the evergreen ones can look outstanding in the winter frosts (fig. 14). 🌿

Colin Moat has twice been a trustee of the HPS and is an active member of the Kent Group. In 'retirement' with his wife, they run Pineview Plants nursery which mainly concentrates on shade-loving perennials, but a number of sun-lovers sneak in too. He previously chaired the RHS Roundtable on epimedium, and is currently one of the assessors for the RHS Sanguisorba Trial (started in 2018), and RHS Persicaria Trial (started in 2019). A full list of plant fairs they attend and mail order details can be found on www.pineviewplants.co.uk.

For further reading I recommend the excellent HPS booklet, *Ferns*, by Neil Timm.

On compost: I recall a talk in which the speaker advised us that ferns don't like peat-free compost. This came as a complete surprise to me, as all the 50+ varieties I grow seem quite happy in the Melcourt Sylvamix peat-free compost I've been using for the past five years, and I haven't the heart to tell them now!