
SUNNYSIDE THYMES

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Know Your Natives

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- **Native Ferns**

You can have a great shade presentation by just adding a few ferns. Limited by their need for adequate moisture, that is probably the single most important growing requirement for ferns. If they are too dry, they may become ragged looking and topple over, then going dormant if a drought continues for too long.

Ferns do prefer shade although some can tolerate fun sun with enough moisture. Once they are planted in a shady area, they need little care except for watering during dry spells.

They can be moved and divided in early fall and also spring time. Keep their roots moist.

Most

native ferns are deer-resistant which make them a great ground cover. They can be under trees with spreading roots such as black walnuts, oak, hickory, pine and elm because there's enough space for plants to grow between the roots.

Some of the hardy ferns for our area include Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*), Maidenhair (*Adiantum pedatum*), Cinnamon Fern (*Osmunda cinnamomea*), Interrupted Fern (*Osmunda claytoniana*) and Ostrich Fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*). Although not a complete listing, it is a good beginning for those wanting more ferns in their shady landscape. A magazine I use for ordering native plants which includes native fern is called Prairie Nursery (prairienursery.com). It also has native seeds and grasses that you can order.

This is a more detailed description of those mentioned: **Christmas Fern**- it's an evergreen perennial about 12-20 inches tall, crowns in clumps with very scaly stalks, leaf blades are about 8-15 inches long and 3-4 inches wide. It grows in a variety of forests, especially on steep creek banks and high hills. It does not produce flowers. It may be the most familiar fern in the forest due to its very basic, yet attractiveness, with simple, leathery and evergreen leaflets that are paired along the stem. It is one of the most common and widespread ferns in the eastern United States. **Maidenhair Fern** - is a perennial 1-2 feet tall with a shiny black or reddish brown leafstalk that forks into two branches at the tip,

blade is fan-shaped about 8-10 inches across, the leaflets all come off one side of each branch. It is found primarily in rich, moist forest conditions, especially in deep ravines and north facing slopes. Maidenhair fern is wide-ranging, occurring in both eastern and western North

America. **Cinnamon Fern** - is named for its cinnamon brown fruiting stalks, it's one of the largest and most dramatic of our native ferns. The stalks are normally 3-4 feet tall and appear in various shades of green. This tall, vase-shaped fern can reach a height of 5 feet in an extremely moist environment. Besides a wet soil, it also likes acid, loamy soil rich in humus and organic material. It does not tolerate drought conditions. It grows well on a stream bank or near a pond. They are non-invasive, can form heavy rhizomes and be divided in late fall after they go dormant. **Interrupted Fern** - this has small spore-bearing leaflets near the middle of the frond, with green lobed leaflets above and below, leaving a gap after shedding spores and leaves a gap from midsummer on, therefore getting its name as interruptive fern. It grows 3-4 feet high and grows best in moderately damp acid soils but can adapt to almost any good garden soil in partial sun to shade. **Ostrich Fern** - this is a large vase-shaped plant with beautifully textured fronds which characterize a colony of ostrich feathers. They spread quickly and can cover large areas in a shady, moist environment. Regular division each spring can keep them in their place. Ostrich Ferns grow 3-5 feet tall. The fronds are deeply tapered at the base and widen at the top, has separate fertile and sterile fronds. Plant in a very moist, humus rich soil in partial to full shade. It can tolerate full sun if consistently wet. For propagation, lift and transplant crowns that have spread beyond the colony in early spring till late fall or divide large established clumps in the fall. They are native to eastern North America, eastern Asia and Europe. It is one of the most common ferns and can tolerate temperatures to -4 Fahrenheit.



Cinnamon fern

Photo: bugwood.org

Ferns can add diversity and beauty to any shade garden or woodland. Before choosing one for a particular location, determine its purpose and choose accordingly. They can be paired with other plants such as astilbe, hostas, and spring flowers such as trilliums, bloodroot, trout lilies, or dutchman's breeches for a more stunning presentation.

Resources:

- Landscaping with Plants Native to Indiana-IN Native Plant Society
- Go Native! By Carolyn Harstad
- Wildflowers and Ferns of Indiana Forest -a field guide- by Michael a, Homoya