

CHRISTMAS FERN

BY TERRY BONACE, ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION GROUP.

Walking in the Indiana Dunes State Park in late December before the first major snowfall, I noticed how green and lush the Christmas ferns (*Polystichum acrosticoides*) were. It could have been a summer day as far as these ferns were concerned. Many fern species are at least partly evergreen but none so pretty at this time of year as the Christmas fern. If you want to see a large number of them, take a walk in the State Park along Trail 2 between the Wilson Shelter and the long boardwalk.

The name is said to come from the fact that the fern fronds were once gathered for Christmas decorations. The deep green and glossy fronds would lend themselves well to holiday decorating. The fronds you see in the winter are what are called “sterile” fronds (the fronds that do not produce spores). The fertile fronds or those with spores do not overwinter. Ferns reproduce by spores that, in many fern species like the Christmas fern, appear on the underside of the frond leaflet. In the spring time, the new fronds, both sterile and fertile, are upright but drop later in the season, creating a circular or semi-circular, cascading arrangement.



This native evergreen fern’s range extends through much of eastern North America. It is most often found on wooded slopes and ravines but also on moist banks near water. In the Indiana Dunes, you will see it most often on those “moist banks.” Besides for Trail 2 in the State Park, it can be easily observed in the woods along Kemil Road between Beverly Drive and the Calumet Trail.

The fern most often used in local gardens is the ostrich fern. While very hardy and a quick spreader, the ostrich fern often turns brown in late summer and does not reappear until the following spring. It can also be quite aggressive in the garden, spreading where you don’t want it. On the other hand, Christmas fern, with excellent winter interest and an attractive circular arrangement of fronds, is not a spreader. But these clumps, after a couple of years, can be divided and transplanted. Also, unless we have Saharan summer conditions, Christmas ferns will not turn brown in late summer. They are also readily available at many nurseries and mail order plant vendors. Plant it with some organic material like compost. Water it well during its first year. Then, once established in shade or part shade locations, it can tolerate our hot and dry summers. The Missouri Botanic Garden says that it is good for planting on slopes to prevent soil erosion, a good feature for those with dune properties.

The Environmental Restoration Group (ERG) will be glad to help identify plants for you and make suggestions for removal of invasives and for native replacements. Don’t hesitate to contact Terry Bonace (tbonace@gmail.com) or Candice Smith (candicepetersonsmith@gmail.com) for assistance. Also please visit our website at www.bserg.org for further information on native and non-native plants.

