

# ERG— NATIVE FERNS IN THE GARDEN

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Ferns make excellent garden plants. They have distinctive and attractive foliage through the growing season. Many are very easy to grow and spread with rhizomes. Some are evergreen and can help to replace invasive, non-native ground covers. All the ferns mentioned here are natives in Northwest Indiana and have some degree of tolerance for dry soils and droughts. But when planted, they need some rich, organic soil to supplement our native sandy soils, and regular watering during their first season. They are also deer resistant (but not deer proof). All are available for purchase either locally or by mail order.

Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrosticoides*), called such because it is still green at Christmas time and beyond, grows in fountain-like clumps. Fountain-like means the most fronds emerge in a clump but curve downward. Each spring the Christmas Fern presents new, upright fronds over the recumbent, overwintering fronds. They do very well in part to full shade. Christmas Fern will not spread but the clumps increase in size with time.



*Christmas Fern*

Another fern with evergreen foliage is the Marginal Shield Fern (*Dryopteris marginalis*). Like Christmas Fern, it does not spread in the garden. “Marginal” refers to the brown, dot-like, spore-bearing structures that occur along the margins of the frond’s underside. Marginal Shield Fern grows upright in a vase-shaped clump, with the evergreen fronds lying nearly flat during the winter months. It does very well in shade.



*Marginal Shield Fern*

Several other ferns do very well in Beverly Shores gardens but are not evergreen. Sensitive Fern (*Onoclea sensibilis*) normally grows in wet soil and spreads by rhizomes. Once it starts spreading in your garden, you will be able to dig it for transplanting. “Sensitive” comes from the fern’s sensitivity to frost. This fern has wavy, deeply lobed fronds. Once established, in spite of its wet native habitat, it will withstand some hot, dry periods. But from experience I have learned that if there are 2 or 3 very hot weeks without rain, sensitive fern will turn brown and not return until the moisture does. Watering in dry periods can prevent this. It tolerates part sun to full shade.



*Sensitive Fern*

Lady Fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*) forms vase shaped clumps with finely divided, lacy fronds. It can grow up to 3 feet in height. When the clumps become large, they can be divided and re-distributed in the garden.



*Lady Fern*

The easiest, but not necessarily the best fern to grow, is Ostrich Fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*). This fern is tolerant of a wide range of conditions and spreads like a weed, by rhizomes. It has very tall fronds, up to 4 to 5 feet when conditions are ideal. The fronds vaguely resemble an ostrich plume, hence the name, and grows in vase-shaped clumps. It can take over a garden if not managed. It also has the disadvantage that in most summers when it becomes hot and dry, it turns completely brown and dries up. Though it will survive this drying out and return the next season, it will leave ugly dried out stems for the rest of the season.

Maiden Hair (*Adiantum pedatum*) is the loveliest of native ferns. It is best described with a photos but it has a unique arrangement of shiny, black stalks in a semicircle. Maiden hair fern spreads slowly by rhizomes, but it takes several seasons for it to start spreading.



*Maiden Hair*

The Environmental Restoration Group (ERG) will be glad to help identify plants for you and make suggestions for removal and for native replacements. Don’t hesitate to contact Terry Bonace ([tbonace@gmail.com](mailto:tbonace@gmail.com)), Candice Smith ([cmsmith2@umail.iu.edu](mailto:cmsmith2@umail.iu.edu)), or Bill Schaudt ([blschaudt2@gmail.com](mailto:blschaudt2@gmail.com)) for assistance. Also please visit our website at [www.bserg.org](http://www.bserg.org) for further information on invasive plants and native replacements.