



NORTH AMERICAN
NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

Dedicated to the study,
conservation, cultivation,
and restoration
of North America's
native flora

Easy-to-grow
Native Ferns
Eastern North America

by Richard Woolger

Ten reasonably abundant ferns native to eastern North America are featured below. If you become a fern buff, you will have to pick up some fern lingo (terminology). A few terms are listed below.

Crosier: a fiddlehead or stem with small uncurling leaves.

Fronde: the entire leaf-stalk with the leaflets (usually compound or twice compound as with palm trees)

Pinnules: leaflets

Sori: little dots on the underside of the leaves (pinnules) which contain spore-producing structures and spores.

Sun/Shade Requirements: All ferns prosper from an hour or two of morning or late afternoon sunshine but several hours of midsummer afternoon sun will be fatal to many types.

Male Fern *Dryopteris filix-mas*

This fern is circumpolar in distribution and is reasonably abundant on the Niagara Escarpment. It is not as large as the Ostrich Fern but similar in appearance and a preferred substitute, because it maintains its good looks into the fall. It likes afternoon shade.



Cinnamon Fern
Osmunda cinnamomea

The Cinnamon is a large fern that prefers moderate shade and tolerates moist to wet soils. Like Male and Ostrich Ferns, it produces its leaves from a single stalk to form a rosette pattern. The name is derived from a spore structure produced in the spring which has a cinnamon colour.

Ostrich Fern *Matteuccia struthiopteris*
(also known as *Ostrich Plume Fern*)

This large fern is common in eastern North America.

In early spring the unfolding fronds are picked and eaten as "fiddleheads". Ostrich ferns often grow in large colonies in full sun or part shade on the floodplains (created by the melting of ice jams) of local creeks or in woody locales. They are often dug from the wild (a practice NANPS does not condone). They are quite adaptable in gardens and spread quickly. The drawback is that they often look ragged and windblown by mid to late summer. The underground runners can also come up in unwanted places.



Sensitive Fern *Onoclea sensibilis*

The beautiful Sensitive Fern derives its name from sensitivity to early fall frosts but is no worse than many others in this regard. It is of medium size with light green fronds that are tropical in appearance. It is one of the most water-tolerant of ferns and, if grown in pots or containers, can be partly submerged. It sends up fronds anywhere along its horizontal creeping stems. Sensitive Ferns (and Ostrich Ferns) produce spore (seed) structures in late summer which persist all winter and can be seen poking up through the snow. They are valued by many for use in dried flower arrangements. This fern can be grown in most gardens if given a little extra water during summer dry spells.



Note: illustrations are not to scale

Christmas Fern

Polystichum acrostichoides

This evergreen fern makes a well-behaved garden subject. It is medium in size and has dark green leathery leaves. It seems to have no special requirements other than shade and well-drained soil. As the name implies, the foliage remains green all winter.



Marginal Fern

Dryopteris marginalis

The name is derived from the pattern of the sori (spore-dot structures) that locate themselves along the outer margin of the underside of the leaf. This moderately common woodland species is of medium size and adapts well to well-shaded garden conditions. The fronds are produced in the typical rosette fern pattern. This fern does not spread.



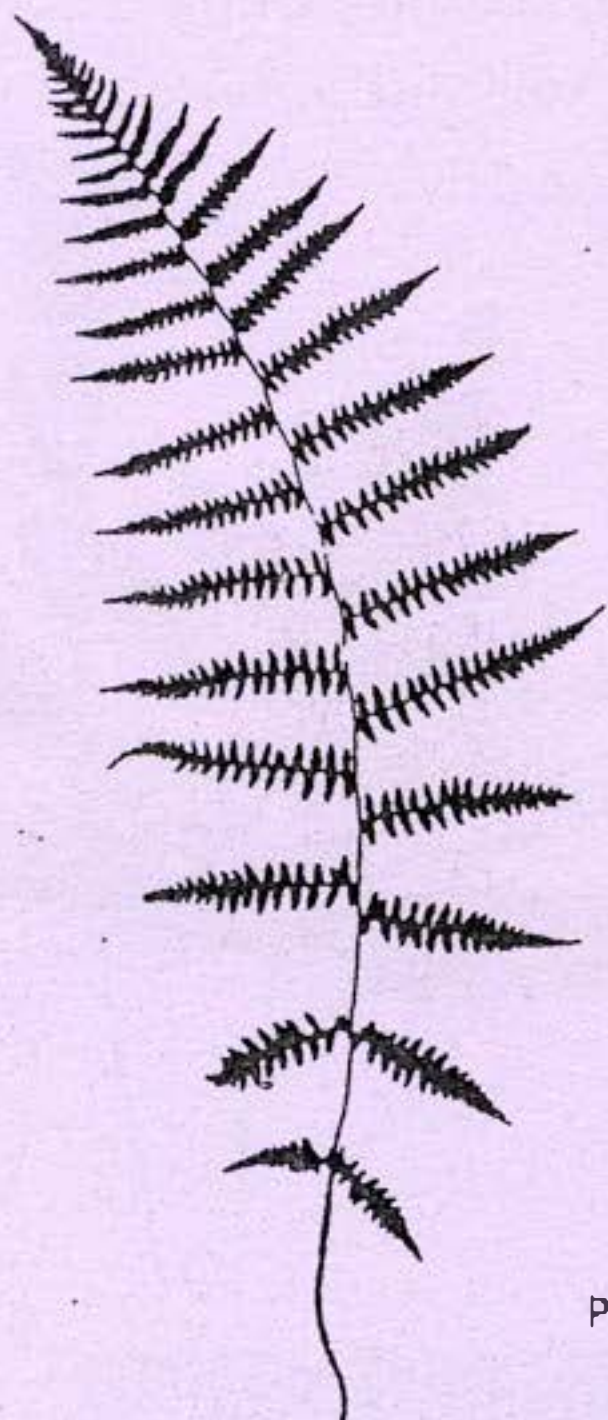
Lady Fern *Athyrium filix-femina*

The common name Lady Fern (like Male Fern) does not denote the sex of the plant. Rather, it makes reference to this plant's dainty appearance. It is a medium to large fern with finely divided pinnae (foliage). A circumboreal species, the Lady Fern prefers dappled sunlight and humusy soil.



Marsh Fern *Thelypteris palustris*

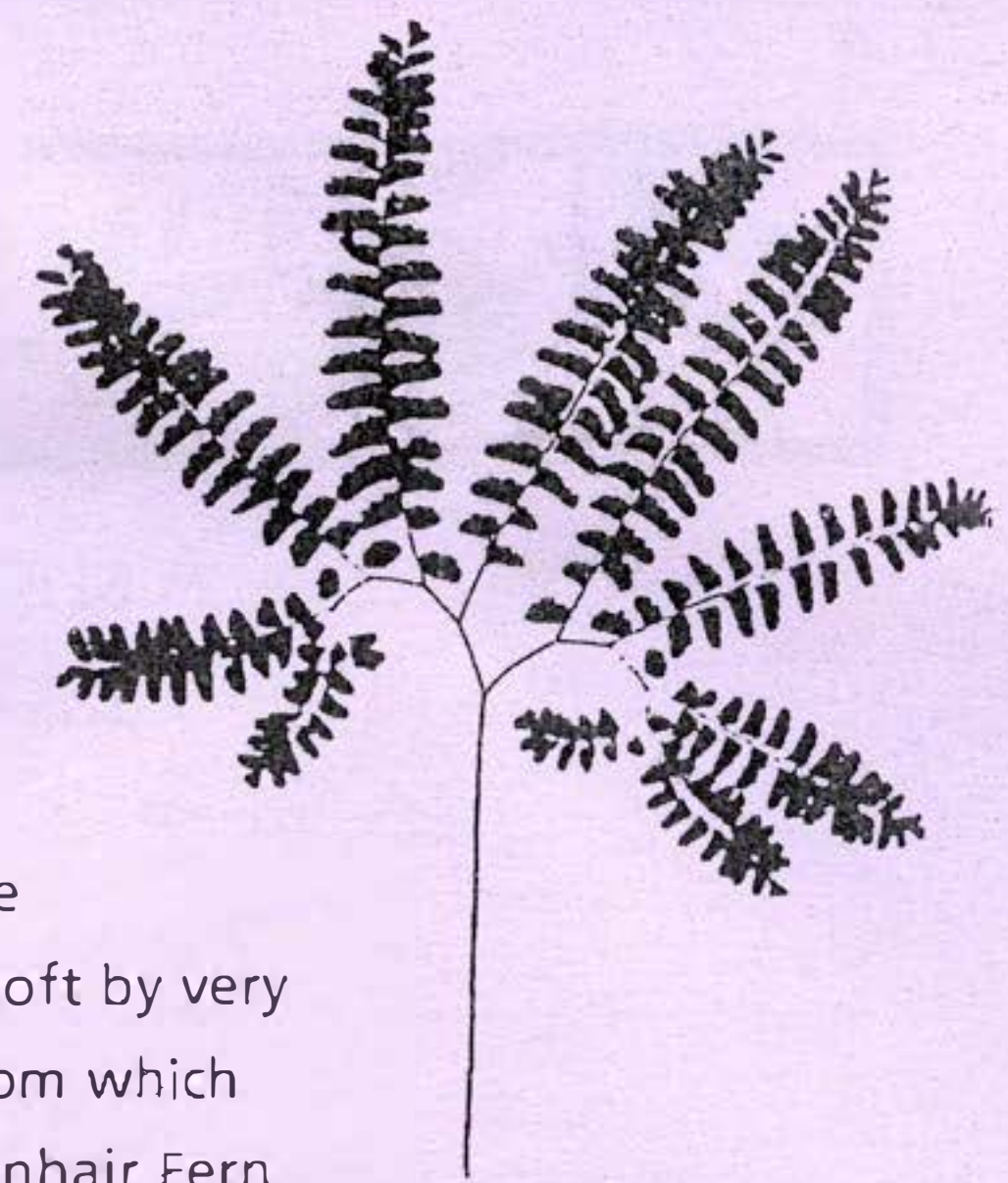
This small to medium fern, as the name implies, will thrive in wet areas but not with its roots completely underwater. It has a creeping habit. Unlike other ferns it does not produce its fronds in rosettes but along its stems. A close relative, the New York Fern, is very similar in appearance and habit, and can cause ID confusion.



Maidenhair Fern

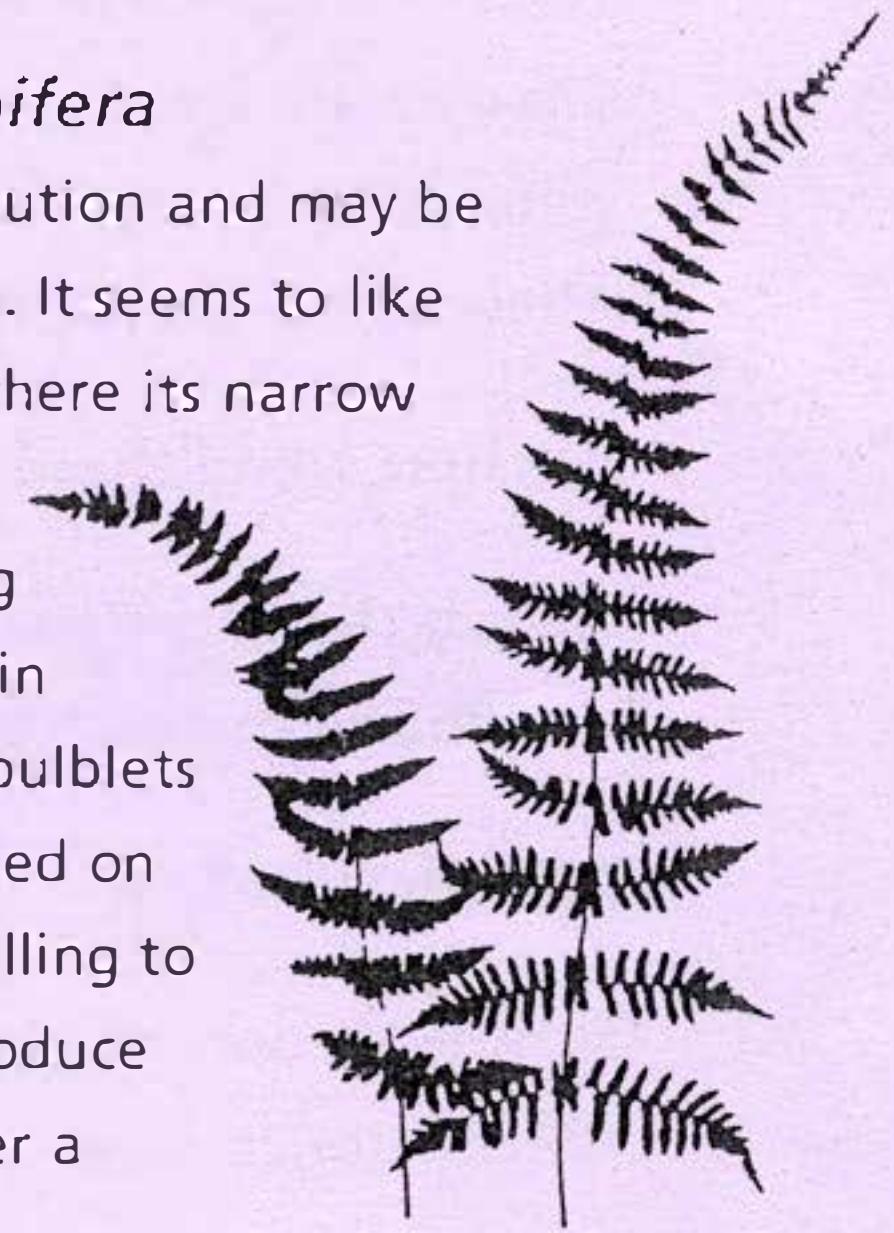
Adiantum pedatum

This is considered by many to be the most beautiful of our native ferns. The roots spread moderately and can form large clumps or colonies which can be divided with a spade. The pinnules (leaflets) are small and dainty and are held aloft by very thin, wiry, shiny, black stalks (from which the name is derived). The Maidenhair Fern generally thrives in a shaded well-drained location.

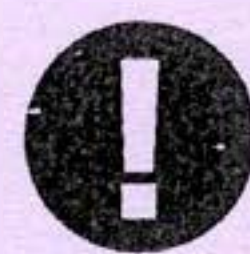


Bulblet Fern *Cystopteris bulbifera*

This fern is small. It is of wide distribution and may be found in large colonies near streams. It seems to like vertical or steeply sloping surfaces where its narrow graceful fronds can be extended without entanglement. The unfurling crosiers (fiddleheads) are bright red in spring. In mid to late summer small bulblets about the size of BB pellets are formed on the underside of the fronds. After falling to the ground they quickly root and produce new plants. This ensures the gardener a good supply of give-away ferns.



Note: illustrations are not to scale



Note: Ferns should not be dug up from the wild. NANPS recommends growing them from spores or purchasing them from reputable nurseries.

References

Ferns and Fern Allies of Canada, by Donald M. Britton and William J. Cody, 1989, Agriculture Canada, Research Branch, Publication #1829/E, 430 pages, ISBN 0-660-13102-1.

A Guide to the Ferns of Grey and Bruce Counties of Ontario, Owen Sound Field Naturalists, 1999, 119 pages, ISBN 0-9680279-2-X.

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e-mail info@nanps.org website www.nanps.org