

Hardy ferns recapture glory days of Victorian gardens

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IF you had been alive in the Victorian era, you would almost certainly have had ferns in your house and your garden.

The popularity of these distant relatives of other photosynthesising organisms came about during the Victorian period as plant hunters began to bring back examples of tropical and temperate ferns from every corner of the globe, along with countless thousands of other plants.

By 1891 the British Pteridological Society had been formed and the rest, as they say, is history. Actually Pteridophytes includes ferns, club mosses (one of the main plants to form coal millions of years ago) and horsetails (one of our most pernicious weeds) but here I am concerned only with the ferns.

With fossilised evidence dating back some 400 million years, the ferns are among the oldest surviving plants on the planet and are estimated to have about 12,000 different species.

And yet, take a look around the average British garden today and the commonest representative of the ferns that you are likely to see is *Dicksonia antarctica*, the New Zealand tree fern, so popularised by Alan Titchmarsh in his Barleywood garden in Hampshire.

Even the tropical ferns that became so popular as house plants, despite the cold, draughty houses in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, have not continued into the modern era.

All this is despite the best efforts of the British Pteridological Society (www.nhm.ac.uk/hosted_sites/bps/) and the associated societies of North America and the Antipodes. Visit a normal garden centre and ask for ferns these days and you are likely to be presented with tree ferns, a couple of house plant ferns and perhaps two or three hardy garden ferns for those damp, shady places.

Good fern gardens have scores of species and varieties giving wonderful variations in leaf form and colour that can provide interest, along with other woodland species, all year round.

So, have you got a shady, damp spot in the garden that is screaming out for some new ideas and new plants? Well, look no further than the hardy ferns.

The Shuttlecock or Ostrich fern, *Matteuccia struthiopteris*, is a suitable one for any smaller garden, with its upright, shuttlecock appearance and relatively well-behaved habit of growth. It prefers a slightly acidic, humus rich soil in dappled shade, each shuttlecock reaching around 1.5 metres (5').

Osmunda regalis, the Royal Fern, was much loved by our Victorian and Edwardian forebears and is still a worthy garden plant for the bog garden or other permanently damp place and, unlike many ferns, will thrive in full sunshine, producing the typical flower spikes in mid to late summer.

The tiny Maidenhair Spleenwort, *Asplenium trichomanes*, not a lover of acidic soils, is an ideal candidate for dry stone walls, crevices and rocky places in the shade. With its rhizomatous and semi-evergreen habit, it will provide interesting cover for otherwise impossible areas.

Dryopteris affinis, the Golden Male Fern, can reach 90 cm (36in) tall and has produced some wonderful variations with twisted and congested fronds that add another dimension to the display.

Preferring a slightly acidic, humus rich soil, this fern can cope with some direct sunshine as well as dappled shade.

So, the next time that you visit a garden show or call in at your local garden centre, why not ask about ferns and recapture the glory days of our Victorian forebears.

There are two NCCPG national collections to visit: Savill and Valley Gardens, Windsor Great Park (www.theroyallandscape.co.uk) and a private collection in Glasgow owned by Professor Wardlaw (0141 9422461). Here are some of the country's leading nurseries dealing in ferns: Crawford Ferns in Dorset – 01258 857240, www.crawfordferns.co.uk ; Longacre Plants – www.longacreplants.co.uk ; The Fern Nursery in Lincolnshire, 01472 398092, www.fernnursery.co.uk ; Fernatix in Suffolk, www.fernatix.co.uk .

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