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Just good fronds

Sleek, sculptural ferns are the perfect plants for a modern look. By Dominic Murphy

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Ferns are prehistoric-looking things that have been around for millions of years, so it is perhaps fitting that the plant group to which they belong, Pteridophyta, sounds like a dinosaur. Until recently, ferns had an old-fashioned image. After their Victorian heyday, their popularity declined so much that, according to the RHS, 60% of variants had been lost by the second world war.

It's easy to see why this happened. Ferns are associated with damp, forgotten corners of the garden, whereas the herbaceous border, popular in Edwardian times, spoke of sunshine and colour. More recently, however, the fortunes of ferns are reviving, thanks partly to an interest in architectural plants.

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But ferns are also big because a handful of specialists are showing that there's more to them than hillside bracken and the stuff that grows in dank hedgerows. One of the star growers is Rickards Hardy Ferns in north Wales (01248 600385, rickardshardyferns.co.uk), which blazed the trail with tree ferns and is now bringing in unusual species from Asia and the Americas. Its nursery, on a hillside with views over the Menai Straits to Anglesey, is home to more than 300 species of ferns. OK, so it's damp north Wales, reinforcing the stereotype that these plants are for gloomy corners. But that is only the half of it.

Location, location

The idea that ferns are suited only to damp areas is misleading. Most ferns don't like to be waterlogged, although there are exceptions, including the royal fern, *Osmunda regalis*, with its beautiful autumn colour, and the handsome *Blechnum chilense*, both of which can grow to 6ft. Some ferns actually thrive in dry areas. The *Cheilanthes* genus, for example, includes natives from arid parts of Asia and the American midwest. These have a reputation for being hard to grow, but are happy in well-drained soils, such as in between the stones in rockeries (try *C. sinuata*). Ferns are tough, so it's worth experimenting, then moving them if they're suffering.

Growing pains

Most ferns are acid-loving, though some, such as aspleniums, will take to an alkaline soil - the maidenhair spleenwort (not to be confused with maidenhair fern) is one such.

Generally, avoid nutrient-rich soils. Ditto sandy soils (ferns aren't that tough). They are fine in pots: plant them in a mix of 60% fine-chip bark and 40% peat-free compost.

When it comes to upkeep, ferns are undemanding: cut off dead material from deciduous varieties when they die back in winter, and evergreens when needed. Once the fronds have given off their spores, they die and can be cut back.

Watch out for insects and slugs, especially on new growth, though *Blechnum*s and *Lophosoria*s tend to be quite pest-resistant.

Maybe babies?

There are two main ways to propagate ferns: spores or

division. Only die-hard enthusiasts will want to try the former, which involves sowing spores on to moist soil, then keeping them in a sealed container in a warm place. Depending on the species, it could be up to three years before the mossy growth from the spores develops into adult fronds.

Division, on the other hand, is straightforward and can be done in autumn or spring when the weather is damp. Suitable varieties for this method include the common shuttlecock or ostrich fern, *Matteuccia struthiopteris* (the mat-forming oak fern), *Gymnocarpium dryopteris* and *Blechnum chilense*

Absolute beginners

Easy ferns to grow include *Dryopteris cycadina* (shaggy wood fern) from south-east Asia. This has deep black, nodding croziers (the bit that's shaped like a shepherd's crook). *Dryopteris affinis* 'Cristata' is a pretty fern with tassels and crests at the edge of the frond.

Polystichum vestitum, a New Zealand native, has hard, shiny green fronds; it is evergreen and grows to around 2ft. There are also masses of setiferum types, many of which are evergreen, that won't tax the amateur grower, and are good for pots. Evergreen polypodiums (*P. interjectum bifido-grandiceps*, say) are also good for containers.

Shady customers

Of course, many ferns are perfect for gloomy corners. *Cyrtomium caryotidium*, an evergreen that grows in Asia and Hawaii, looks more like a palm than a fern. The Japanese holly fern (*C. fulcatum*) and feathery east India holly fern (*Arachniodes simplicior*) are two other contenders, while *Dryopteris* 'Goldieana' (Goldie's woodfern) will grow to fill a large space.

Year-round winner

Lophosoria quadripinnata, from central and south America, forms magnificent stipes (stems) with a silvery blue underside. It grows to 12ft and is a good architectural specimen. And let's not forget the mature dicksonias, or tree ferns, which, despite their ubiquity, are still head-turners. If you can afford one, these are happy in a pot or in the garden. For something a bit different, go for ones with twisted trunks, such as *D. antarctica*, *D. fibrosa* or *Cyathea australis*

Show stoppers

Blechnum chilense (Chilean hard fern) grows to 6ft and copes well with tough winters. It loves being damp and is perfect for the British climate but is rarely seen over here. Young croziers on this evergreen plant emerge a reddish colour and resemble a ribcage. It clumps out really well, too.

. For more information on ferns, go to nhm.ac.uk

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