

Healthy Indoor Ferns

I feel somewhat better when I read that Deb Brown, retired Extension Horticulturist, had trouble growing indoor ferns. Deb and I had the same ritual of every few years plunking money down for a healthy new fern, only to have it take its last gasp within a year.

The difference is that when Deb moved away from a home with tall shady trees into a town house with unobstructed west windows, her luck changed. However, my luck raising indoor ferns remains the same.

Most ferns thrive in filtered light or shade sites outdoors, but the tropical ferns we use as houseplants are poor candidates for low light locations.

Tropical ferns grow best in medium light such as east-facing windows. During the short days from November through February, ferns can be placed directly in a sunny window without any ill effect. As the days lengthen and sunlight becomes more intense, you run the risk of burning delicate foliage in bright places, unless the light in those windows is filtered by trees or curtains.

Indoor ferns need to be kept evenly moist. The soil should never be allowed to become too dry, but it can't remain wet either. Water the ferns thoroughly each time and use room temperature or lukewarm water. Don't use water softened water if you can avoid it. Water until excess moisture begin to drip through the container's drain hole, then spill out whatever remains in the tray or saucer after a few minutes. Don't water again until the soil surface feels dry to the touch as soggy soil encourage root rot.

Ferns are usually potted in highly organic soil that is porous, yet moisture-retentive. When it's time to transplant them into larger containers, choose potting soil that has a large percentage of peat moss.

Place ferns far enough from walls and other plants to ensure good air circulation. Many times ferns are grown in hanging baskets, but you must be careful not to hang them too close to the ceiling. Since temperatures are higher and the air is dryer near the ceiling, the tips of the fern's fronds are more likely to turn brown and die.

Ferns are known for their high humidity needs. Some people still mist their ferns to increase humidity, but it's not really very effective. Misting also increases the chance of foliar leaf spot disease. Therefore, it's better to use a room humidifier and concentrate on proper watering to eliminate moisture stress.

They have modest fertilizer needs and they can be damaged more easily than houseplants if they are over fertilized. This will result in browning and drying that begins at the tips and works its way back into the rest of the frond. A lack of nutrients results foliage that is pale and loses its vibrant color. Fertilize only when the plants are actively putting on new growth.

There are many types of ferns that are easy to grow, at least according to Deb Brown. Boston Fern is an old-fashioned fern that, by now, has many mutations that have all but taken over the

original Boston Fern. Some of the other ferns are the Dallas Fern, Rabbits Foot Fern, Mothers Fern, Holly Fern, and the Sprenger Fern. Each one of them has their own unique characteristics.

Maidenhair and Staghorn ferns probably should be avoided unless you like a real challenge, as they can be difficult to grow.

Maybe it's easy for Deb to grow indoor ferns, but as for me, I'll stick to growing outdoor ferns.

VOICE MAIL: You can leave a question for a volunteer Master Gardener at our NEW PHONE # 651-213-8904 any time of day or night. You can also get your question answered on the web at: www.extension.umn.edu/askmg

The Chisago County Extension Office is now sharing office space with Veterans Administration in the Senior Center building at 38794 6th Avenue in North Branch.

Plans are underway for our Gardening Bonanza—Town and Country Expo--to be held in North Branch on March 8. Information on our spring events, including the plant sale will be mailed and posted on our website www.extension.umn.edu/county/chisago/mg about Jan. 15.

Submitted by Jerry Vitaliz
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