

The Wonderful World of Ferns

Hardy fern gardening really took off in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century with a sudden rise in popularity that later became known as the *Victorian Fern Craze*. Many people began growing ferns indoors, but they also experimented with native fern species in their outdoor gardens. It became a common social activity at that time to explore the woods on a Sunday afternoon for different fern species, and to dig them for one's garden. However, the *Fern Craze* extended beyond just the growing and collecting of fern species. It also became trendy to decorate using fern motifs. Therefore, fern patterns can be found on most British pottery, silverware, picture frames, and other items dating back to that time period. The British interest in fern cultivation still continues today, with fern societies being as widespread as ever.

Many horticulturalists, Tom included, have always been a bit surprised and disappointed that ferns are not as popular in North America. According to fern expert Dr. John Mickel of the New York Botanical Garden, "Ferns are undoubtedly the most overlooked and underutilized class of perennial garden plants." Over the years, many misconceptions have arisen regarding ferns. Some gardeners worry that ferns are difficult to grow; however, the opposite is true. For the most part, hardy ferns are very easy to grow and require little care. They are the perfect solution for folks who want a low maintenance landscape.

Another view that some people have regarding ferns is that "They come up and that's it," or "They don't do anything; they're just green," but green is a color too! Even though ferns lack the bright colors provided by flowers, they are still remarkably diverse in terms of frond (leaf) size, shape texture, division, and even color and are particularly useful in the shady garden or landscape. Different varieties of ferns can also handle different water and soil conditions; some can even be planted in extraordinarily wet niches in the landscape. Many, though not all, ferns flaunt evergreen or semi-evergreen foliage, thereby adding winter interest. This is a rather unusual feature for a perennial. With 17 different fern varieties to choose from at Beining's, you're sure to find a fern perfect for any shady space in your landscape.