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Garden Patch
By Phyllis Webster

Choose Ferns For Shade

Although shade is a coveted commodity in summer, gardeners often complain about too much shade. That's because flowering plants generally need a lot of sunlight, as do vegetables, herbs and lawns. Cultivating a shady landscape means learning to love plants that live in the shadows rather than those that crave the spotlight.

Shade gardens are often more about form and texture than bright colors, which is why perennial ferns are superstars in spaces with limited light, such as woodlands, mature treed lots and multi-tiered landscapes. Ferns, which are rarely bothered by pests, are dependable plants for shade. They are deer-resistant, easy-to-maintain and hardy when mature. As with other perennials, certain ferns perform better than others in N. Central Texas. Best selections are those that are winter hardy to Zone 7 or 8.

Grow ferns mostly in shade. Southern wood fern and holly fern will tolerate morning sun. Ferns have medium water requirements once established, so provide irrigation at least once a week in the absence of rain. Select a site that is well drained and enrich the soil with organic matter before planting. Annual fertilization with a slow-release product is suggested, but rarely needed when ferns grow in rich organic soil.

Southern wood fern is commonly grown in Texas landscapes. It is extremely hardy, yet drought tolerant. Its arching, light-green fronds glow when illuminated by angled early morning or late day sun. This native plant spreads by underground rhizomes to quickly colonize an area. It is deciduous, which means it will completely die back in winter.

Holly fern is semi-evergreen, which means that it will remain evergreen in mild winters. In severe winter weather the foliage will show cold damage, but the plant will bounce back in warm weather. The luxuriant dark green foliage is coarsely textured, looking more like holly shrub leaves than the softer, airier foliage of most ferns.



Autumn fern is popular in area shade gardens because it is more reliably evergreen in Zone 7. It also offers seasonal color — copper-colored new growth and bronze fall foliage. Autumn, holly and southern wood ferns grow to 2' tall and spread 2' or more.

Japanese painted fern is considered one of the most attractive ferns. New foliage has a silver and burgundy color pattern that brightens dark areas of the garden. It dies back to the ground in winter in all but the mildest weather. It is petite — 12"-18" tall and wide.

Ferns naturally reproduce by spores, which are evident on the backside of fronds. These “polka dots” aligned in long rows invite close inspection and add character to the plants.

For answers to your horticulture questions, please call the Texas AgriLife Extension, Hood County at 817-579-3280 or go online to visit lakegranburymastergardeners.org.