

Building a Fern Table

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Several years ago a good friend of mine introduced me to one of the Pacific Northwest's horticultural icons, Nancy Davison Short the former Northwest garden editor for Sunset Magazine. Nancy created a diverse and rich landscape in her Yarrow Point home near Seattle, Washington. While touring her garden I was drawn to one of its most unique features, the fern table. The table was a sturdy structure about two feet high and the size of a rather large dining table (3 feet by 9 feet). The surface was covered with an esthetically pleasing arrangement of rocks and moss with thoughtfully placed perennials and slow growing shrubs, but the crowning glory was a choice selection of exceptional ferns. The soft textures and flowing forms tied the table top garden into the surrounding space. Nancy gave credit for this creation to a dear friend of hers George Schenk. George is an former nursery owner and well know author with a passion and love for plants and a keen ability to use them in extraordinary ways. Inspired by this duo I tried my hand at making my own fern tables and the experience has created an inspiring dimension to my garden work.

Selection of Materials

The Table

Be creative when think about a fern table. It could be a simple as a very sturdy metal outdoor table or as elaborate as a huge smooth slate slab, perched on carved stone legs. The important point is that you need enough flat surface to add soil, plants and stone and not have it dry out too quickly in summer. I find that I need at least a two foot by two foot flat surface. If you go larger it is best to place the table where you want to before planting, these thing become quite heavy very quickly. I would also recommend that you try to keep the width no more the three and half feet. This will allow you to easily reach the center of the table for watering, weeding and replacing plants in the future. For a small table I have used 24 x 24 inch high strength concrete pavers placed on top of concrete blocks or terracotta chimney liners. Although they are still heavy they can be easily taken apart and moved if necessary.

Soil

It is important to have a soil that is both moisture retentive, but will be course enough for air the reach the roots. I basic mix that I have use with good success is:

2 parts coarse compost
1 part medium to fine bark

1 part coarse sand
1 to 2 parts pea gravel

This mix has a more natural look than commercial mixes with pumice or perlite. I find that nothing destroys a nature planting than seeing perlite floating around on the surface. If you must use a commercial mix, use one that contains pumice. It is less noticeable in the finished table.

Stone and Wood

To create a nature and flowing feel I always add a selection of stones and often interesting bits of wood. This is a chance for creativity to take over. If you feel a little unartistic here are a few suggestions that will help tie it together.

1. I always use local stone and wood. I will often rob bits from other areas in the garden. I think this will help the table relate to its surrounding space.
2. Have all the stone or wood be of the same type. This will lend continuity to the table. If each piece of stone or wood has a different color and texture it is almost impossible to make it look cohesive with a mixture of plants as well.
3. Look for weathered wood. I will add rotting and overly weathered wood to give an appearance of age. I try to make the table look like a slice of the forest has been lifted and placed there for your viewing pleasure.
4. Look for character in the pieces. Although, you do not want each piece to be filled with character one or two piece will lend interest. A section of heavily knotted rotting log mixed with more mundane section of rotted log make the eye focus on interesting form presented. A prominently placed unusually shaped stone mixed with other of the some color and texture will achieve similar results.
5. Place the rocks or wood in groups of odd numbers, starting with the largest and most interesting pieces. Keep in mind that generally speaking at least one third of the each piece will be buried in soil as it is placed.

Plants

I choose medium to small ferns (maturing under 12 inches tall) for this planting. It is best to have good hardy choices. The root will be subjected to colder and warmer temperatures than if there were planted into the ground. The ferns are the main focus, but I like to accentuate them with dwarf shrubs and low tight growing perennials. It is a good time to visit your specialty nurseries. Dwarf rhododendrons and azaleas can add evergreen foliage and flowers to the mix. Small pots of shade tolerant dwarf conifers have also worked out well. The plethora of tiny and dense hemlock cultivars seem like they are begging to be added to a fern table. Nancy Davison-Shorts table features *Microbiota decussata*, Russian cypress, which cascades over the side. I am sure a local alpine grower could suggest many choice additions. I have also found the fern tables to be an outlet for my obsession with mini hosts. These tough little plants make the perfect complement for the ferns.

Putting it All Together

Once the table is in place on a flat level area it can be planted. I start with placing the largest and most dramatic pieces of stone and wood on the table surface. Keep in mind that the soil in the center of the table will end up at least 8 inches deep and up to 12 inches deep. The stones or wood may need to be placed on a shallow bed of soil to be seen. If the table is small (2 to 3 feet) I will also place stones and small pieces of wood along the edges to act as a border to keep soil from washing off the sides when watering. Once a few major pieces are placed I will spread a shallow layer of soil over the table and add the two or three focal point plants. At this point you should have the general framework of the planting. I would then alternate between smaller stone, wood and plants until everything is planted. To finish off the table I will often cover the remaining soil with moss. I would strongly encourage you collecting moss from your own garden. Mosses collected from native area often will not survive and can deplete wild populations. Mosses from your own garden are much more likely to thrive in the planting. It is important to cover much of the soil surface, if not with moss, you can use gravel. This helps hold the soil in place until the plant root can bind it all together. Once the planting is finished and the remaining soil is covered give a gentle slow watering making sure that the plants and soil have settled in.

Care and Management

Watering

Watering will be the most critical aspect for a successful fern table. During the growing season it will need to be checked daily. If the surface is dry, water gently. If the table does dry out it is important to give it several gentle waterings to make sure the soil has rehydrated. Poke your finger into the planting to make sure the water has penetrated and is not just running off. Excess water will naturally drain off the edges of the table.

Pests and Diseases

By choosing sturdy reliable plants you can eliminate dealing with many pests or diseases. The biggest problems I have had to deal with are slugs and occasionally aphids. Slugs can easily be taken care of through the discreet use of baits on the table and by scattering baits around the base and surrounding garden. Aphids seem to only be a problem for a short period in the spring. When noticed, I use an appropriate insecticide and spot spray the plant. Refrain from spraying the entire table it is easy to damage the new fronds emerging and can kill beneficial predators hiding in the miniature landscape.

Refreshing the Table

Over time you will notice some plants not doing well and others doing too well. Do not be afraid to remove these underachievers and thugs and put others in their place. Take a look at the composition of the planting in the spring and move around anything that seems out of place. It is also a good time to add more plants to fill in gaps or add other seasonal interest or divide successful groundcovers to other areas on the table. Fern tables are a fun and eye catching addition to the garden and well worth trying. Once you do one it is hard to not do more!