

Building a Fern Table

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The varied textures and interesting leaf shapes of ferns make them an ideal candidate for naturalistic table gardens. They can be either a supporting character or the whole body of a stylish and eye catching design. I find that I use a variety of ferns in the table gardens around my house and those I have built for friends. Some tables hold bold architectural ferns providing a dramatic centerpiece surrounded by smaller complimentary plants. Others hold woody plants dominating the scene with a billow the fronds below creating a lush groundcover. Many of the ferns I use are hardy perennial subjects remaining outside virtually unprotected through the winter. If you are concerned about winter hardiness in containers it is best to choose plants that are at least one USDA zone hardier than the zone you live in. Unfortunately, I also have a weakness for the tender and marginally hardy selections. These ferns are used as annuals or removed to over winter in a protected location.

Here are some temperature tips for sheltering tender ferns.

- If temperature drop below 40 degrees F(4 degrees C), all tropical ferns are brought inside where they will remain for winter.
- If temperature drop below 28 degrees F(-2 degrees C), all ferns hardy in USDA zone 9 are protected in unheated structures (a garage generally is fine) then returned outside once temperatures warm.
- If temperature drop below 20 degrees F(-7 degrees C), all ferns hardy in USDA zone 8 are protected in unheated structures and zone 9 ferns are brought inside until outside temperatures warm
- If your temperature regularly drops into the teens or lower it is best to protect the entire fern table. Plantings built on slabs can simply be removed from their perch and placed on the ground. If the table top cannot be removed the entire table can be covered with a heavy blanket and plastic during the coldest temperatures.

All of this may sound like a bit much, but I can assure you there are worse vices in this world. I long ago accepted my fate of my living room occasionally resembling a jungle of almost hardy plants a few times each winter. I urge others to join my ranks.

Think of your planted tables as places to show off the best in your garden and use them where their impact will be maximized. Near doorways and patios are ideal locations. Try to keep in mind that they will need watering so do not stray too far from a hose. I try to refresh the plantings every two to three years in the spring checking to see what looks good and what needs to be replaced. When putting together a mixed planting there are numerous articles and books on the mechanics of plant placement and design principles. The best advice I can give is to use some of the following helpful hints and enjoy the creative process. There is no use in going through the trouble if the pot just reminds you of a troublesome garden adventure. Here are several guidelines I try to keep in mind while designing a fern table.

About the table:

- Go as big as you can. The larger the table the more you can do with it and it will be slower to dry out in the heat of the summer.
- Look for sturdy construction. They are heavy once they are planted.
- Do not worry about drainage. Flat surfaces drain fine with no drainage holes. I find that a solid flat surface holds a little extra moisture in the summer.

About the soil:

- I plan for tables with perennials plants to last for about two to three years. The usual container soil mixes have a substantial amount of peat moss. Over the course of a year peat moss decomposes into a heavy muck and is best for one year of use. I prefer a much lighter soil mix with bark, compost and pumice or gravel. I avoid perlite because of its ugly tendency to float to the surface after each watering. The extra coarse material is much slower to decompose allowing for more air to reach the roots. This lighter mix is especially good for the Northwest where heavy winter rains can drown plants in dense soils. In warmer areas use less gravel and more bark to help retain more moisture while still keeping the mix light and airy. It is always a good idea to check with the local Cooperative Extension Service for other container mixes that will hold up well in your climate. I have listed some soil mixes on the Miller Garden website (www.millergarden.org) that have worked well for me, start with these and adjust for your climate.
- This basic mix will work well for most ferns, but there are special cases. More gravel and pumice are added for alpine plantings and for some ferns that require even moisture. I use the old standard potting soil mixes made with peat moss.

About the design:

- Start with a focal point. This can either be a striking specimen fern, a choice woody ornamental, or an interesting twisted piece of wood or shapely stone.
- Don't get tied down with working with odd numbers of plants or about placing plants from the tallest to the smallest. These are helpful rules, but the idea is to have fun and end up with something you enjoy. The more you let your imagination run with the planting the less you will rely on any rules.
- Use texture and color boldly. Fern tables are supposed to draw the attention of the viewer.
- Sometimes it helps to keep it simple. A single beautiful fern surrounded by moss in an elegant container is the height of horticultural taste and fashion.
- Do not be afraid to edit later. I always tend to over plant then remove the extra later in the season.

About the maintenance:

- 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 fully rehydrated. Poke your finger into the planting to make sure the water has penetrated and is not just running off and down sides of the planting.
- By choosing sturdy reliable plants you can eliminate dealing with many pests or diseases. The biggest problem is dealing slugs, snails and occasionally aphids. Slugs and snails are easily controlled with diligent patrolling and removing the offenders or the discreet use of baits. Aphids are a problem for a short period in the spring. Use an appropriate insecticide and spot spray the plant if necessary. Refrain from spraying the entire container-- it is easy to damage the new emerging fronds and kill beneficial predators hiding in neighboring plants.
- I prefer a slow release fertilizer because I know I will not remember to liquid feed regularly. Either will do a great job at keeping the container looking lush and fresh. Use a balanced all purpose fertilizer for the best results. Sometimes the slow release loses its punch toward the end on summer. Rather than applying a second dose I will use liquid feeds about every other week until mid-August. In late August I stop all feeding to insure the ferns enter their fall dormancy properly.
- Containers are all about looks. If a fern burns in the summer heat do not hesitate to replace it. In mid to late summer it is often difficult to find large hardy ferns so try a tropical fern. It will fill the void and look great through the remainder of the growing season. Tropical ferns are widely available and can be found at very reasonable prices. It is worth every penny to replace with a lush tropical to keep a container in a prime location looking its best.

I hope these words of advice help keep your garden looking its best for the season. Fern tables are wonderful elements that can allow anyone to have a garden. I think the part of building one I enjoy the most is that your imagination is your only limitation, so be creative and enjoy!

Starter list for ferns tables

Large Single Specimens

Arachniodes simplicior 'Variegata'
Athyrium filix-femina 'Victoriae'
Athyrium otophorum (eared lady fern)
Cyrtomium fortunei (holly fern)
Dryopteris erythrosora (autumn fern)
Polystichum aculeatum (hard shield)
Polystichum makinoi (Makino's holly fern)
Polystichum neolobatum (long-eared holly fern)
Polystichum setiferum (soft shield ferns)

Medium ferns for small groupings

Asplenium scolopendrium (Hart's tongue fern)
Athyrium filix-femina 'Frizelliae' (tatting fern)
Athyrium filix-femina 'Minutissimum' (dwarf lady fern)
Blechnum spicant (deer fern)
Dryopteris erythrosora 'Prolifica'
Polypodium scolieri (leather polypody)
Polystichum tsussimense (Korean rock fern)

Small and dwarf ferns for groupings or interesting small specimens

Adiantum aleuticum 'Subpumilum' (dwarf Western maidenhair)
Asplenium trichomanes (maidenhair spleenwort)
Blechnum penna-marina (little hard fern)
Cheilanthes lanosa (hairy lip fern)
Dryopteris affinis 'Congesta Cristata'
Dryopteris affinis 'Crispa Gracilis'
Woodsia polystichoides (holly-fern woodsia)

Low groundcover ferns

Blechnum penna-marina (little hard fern)
Polypodium glycyrrhiza (licorice fern)
Polypodium scolieri (leather leaf polypody)
Polypodium vulgare

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