

# The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

July 2008

## Ferns Make “Quiet” Impact

Martha Smith, horticulture educator

In today’s “WOW” gardening, ferns are the quiet, forgotten, old-faithful plants. Today, flowers and color and architectural embellishments may be the rage. But, ferns are forever and always will be great foliage plants. In fact, foliage is all they have to offer. Basically green and functional, many think ferns don’t have the new millennium look. But to quote Allan Armitage, “Maybe it’s time to put the brakes on the big, bold and bodacious, and examine the quiet, classic and useful.”



In general, ferns tolerate partial sun/shade. If provided with ample soil moisture, some ferns have been known to tolerate full sun. Moist, well-drained garden soil that has been amended with compost or humus is ideal for most ferns. If the site is not right, the plants will show it with scorched foliage. Ferns are low maintenance plants with few pest problems. They are in fact, quiet.

Consider some of these all-time favorites for your garden areas:

*Matteuccia pennsylvanica*, Ostrich Fern offers 4-foot tall, ostrich plume-shaped, dark green fronds. It will grow in sun or shade but does require a moist soil. In swampy areas, it can reach up to 7 feet tall.

*Athyrium nipponicum*, Japanese Painted Fern does offer “WOW” foliage for our garden. The cultivar ‘Pictum’ offers us a kaleidoscope of colors on a compact plant. The unique color and texture of the fronds make it an excellent plant for the shade garden. Growing 8 to 12 inches, it offers gray/blue/green foliage on maroon stalks. ‘Ghost’ is a cross between lady fern and painted fern and offers a unique look.

*Athyrium filix-femina*, Lady Fern is a vigorous and useful plant. Although it offers only green foliage, this fern is great for difficult shady spots. Reaching 2 to 3 feet tall, it is useful as a background plant and looks good massed along a stream. The cultivar ‘Victoriae,’ Victoria Fern, is bigger, reaching up to 4 feet in the garden. ‘Cristata,’ Crested Fern has fronds that are bunched up at the ends.

*Adiantum pedatum*, Maidenhair fern is a fine-textured fern suited for the woodland setting or shaded rock garden. In evenly moist soil, it reaches heights of 12 to 18 inches. The green horseshoe-arranged foliage is borne on shiny brownish-black stalks.

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# Gardening Fun for Kids

David Robson, horticulture educator



The summer months are a great time to get children excited about gardening.

Give children a small corner of the garden for a few plants. Keep the area small so it will be easy to manage. Teach them about how plants grow

and how to care for their plants. Let them plant, water, weed and pick their vegetables and flowers. Encourage their success.

One fun project to do outside is to make a teepee with garden vegetables. The American Indians gave us beans and corn. Often the Indians planted beans at the base of corn so as the beans grew, the plants could climb up the corn stalks.

Choose a sunny area of the garden for the plant teepee. Take 5 branches, limbs, stakes or dowel rods about 8 feet long, and tie them together with string near one end. Spread the untied ends out to form a teepee. Divide the circle—forming the base of the teepee—in eight sections. Have five divisions containing stakes and nothing in the remaining three. This space will form the entrance to the teepee.

At the base of each stake, plant three pole beans. For some color use Scarlet Runner beans. As the plant grows, there will be a shady place for children to crawl under.

Beans can be picked from the outside and the inside. A variation on this is to attach long strings from the ground to the garage eaves and continue this along the length of the wall. What forms will be a lean-to type dwelling.

Indoors, children can watch the process of seeds germinating by growing bean sprouts. Take a glass quart jar and put into it 1/4 cup mung bean seeds. Cover the opening with a piece of clean pantyhose or cheesecloth, and attach it near the top of the jar with a rubber band.

Pour water into the container. Rinse, and pour out. Pour enough water into the jar to cover seeds with an additional 1/2 inch. Place the jar in a dark area at room temperature. Rinse seeds two or three times per day, replacing the water. The sprouts will be light colored since they have been kept in the dark. The bean sprouts will be ready to use in a few days.

Family outings offer both fun and learning. Visit a nearby park or nature center. Look at the different shapes of leaves. Visit a local farmers' market to talk with the growers of food and flowers. While checking out the produce, make a game of spotting how many different parts of the plants we use as food. For example: fruit (cherries), seed (peas), stem (rhubarb), flower buds (broccoli) or roots (carrots).

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# Question Corner

Answers provided by David Robson, U of I Extension horticulture educator

*Q.* I have had two white peonies for years, and they have always bloomed well. The last couple years, they have only had two or three blooms on them.

Do they need to be dug and separated into more plants, or is there something else I should be doing?

*A.* Peonies do not need to be divided. There are eight reasons peonies fail to bloom. Your problem could be any one or a combination of these situations:

1. Too wet
2. Too dry
3. Too much shade. We sometimes forget that trees and shrubs grow and provide shade. Peonies like full sun.
4. Diseases that reduce the quality of the leaves and cut down the food production for next year; botrytis (peony blight) is one of the most common. Keep the area sanitary by removing foliage at the end of the season (October) and discarding to a compost pile; don't let foliage remain on the ground.
5. Competition from tree and shrub roots.
6. Removing too much foliage or removing foliage too soon. Keep foliage on plants until frost kills it; don't remove it any earlier.

7. Planted too deep. A peony will actually move itself up if planted too deep...and won't move itself down. However, if you added more soil over the years, or provided excess mulch, that might cause a problem.
8. Lack of nutrients; peonies need a nitrogen fertilizer. Just avoid over-fertilizing. Rose food is sufficient.



*Q.* I have a hydrangea that is about 10 years old. It is planted on the north side of my house in partial shade. It has always bloomed every year. But this year, it did not bloom. Do you have any advice?

*A.* It's possible that, one year in 10, the blooms froze off during the winter. The plant may also be in need of a good pruning to stimulate new growth, depending on the type of hydrangea it is. Some of the hydrangeas, such as those that turn purple or blue, produce flower buds in the fall for next year's blooms. If they froze off, for whatever reasons, the plant won't bloom. Keep watering the plant. Fertilize to stimulate growth. Protect it this winter, or keep your fingers crossed that 2008 was an aberration.

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Send your lawn and garden questions to:

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# Continual Bloom of Lantana Make It a Garden Favorite

Ed Billingsley, guest columnist



If you are looking for a hardy annual that attracts butterflies, consider lantana. This plant will survive in full sun and bloom continually throughout our hot southern Illinois summers. It grows 4 feet wide and 2 to 3 feet high.

At planting, water thoroughly and then add mulch to control weeds and conserve moisture. Once lantana becomes established, you will only need to water it in extreme drought conditions.

Like all annuals, lantana can be pruned to keep it confined within its space. Lightly deadhead the plant to encourage additional blooming.

The flowers will typically change their color as they mature. Flower clusters are a mix of orange, yellow, red, or white.

Lantana is classified as poisonous, so caution should be observed. Never throw cuttings into a pasture where animals might eat them. Also, keep children away from the plant's berries.

The newer sterile varieties are best since they produce no berries and will continue with heavy blooms throughout the season.

Lantana's bright multi-colored floral display and its ability to tolerate heat make it a favorite among gardeners. And, the added bonus is that butterflies are likely to visit regularly.



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