Winter Care of the Fern Garden

by F. Gordon Foster

Ferns, during their span of hundreds of millions of years, have adapted themselves to habitats of their own liking. To this end they have thrived, reproduced, and spread, as seen in large stands of ostrich ferns and also of the osmundas.

When man introduced these interesting foliar plants into his garden, the picture vastly changed. Sometimes their new locations have been similar or even more favorable than their native haunts. Other times, light, moisture and soil conditions have been so adverse that the struggle for survival has been futile.

In fern culture, where reasonably natural growing conditions have been simulated, a small amount of winter care can be most beneficial. Most hardy northern ferns readily tolerate severe sub-zero weather. However, many ferns grow in protected areas and ravines where they become covered with a heavy blanket of snow which does not melt until the spring season is well advanced. Much damage to garden ferns comes in the spring from alternate thawing and freezing which tends to heave plants from their natural position. Injury to the croziers in early spring and leaf damage during the summer often result from wind, especially the cold dry winds of winter. For best fern growth, particularly of the large species, avoid planting in natural wind passages.

Sometime during the early fall give the "ground" ferns a sprinkling of well-rotted compost or a mixture of screened topsoil and peat moss. Applied before the falling of the tree leaves, it will act as a light mulch and greatly improve the soil.

Check the "rock" ferns before freezing weather occurs. Grub-seeking birds in search of food will often pull out cliff brakes and rock-cap ferns. Work a mixture of humus and decomposing leaf mold or pine needles into the rock crevices; both soil and ferns can be neatly held in position with a few small stones.

For a few special ferns which are considered hardy but are borderline cases in the area I use mini-greenhouses for their protection. These are really temporary cold frames made from 2 by 12 inch planks, 18 inches long, and placed over the plant. Soil is banked around the base to keep out wind. The top of the frame is covered with 1 inch mesh poultry netting and kept open until mid-December; the wire screen is then covered with transparent plastic sheathing. Allow a small opening to avoid sweating during mild winter days. Gradually remove the plastic covering as spring advances but leave the wind-breaking wooden frame until late April. In this way the plant is shielded from the winter elements and also damage from being walked on during the budding stage.
Asiatic Indian Remedies

It may be of some interest to list the uses of two pteridophytes as seen through the eyes of Indians. The following is copied from the booklet "Medicinal, Economic and Useful Plants of India" by S. K. Das, proprietor of the Bally Seed Store, West Bengal, India.

\textit{Lycopodium clavatum}-herb. Plant is antiseptic, diuretic, demulcent, haemostatic and emmenagogue. It is taken internally in disorders of kidney and urinary tract, Nephritis, Cystitis, Gastritis, Rheumatism, Pulmonary derangement and Puerperal haemorrhage.

\textit{Marsilea quadrifolia}-Aquatic creeper. Raw leaf juice, cooked spinach or dressed salad relieves insomnia, hallucinations (Soporific), rheumatism, paraplegia, obesity, and haematemesis. Seed is taken in Strangury(Diuretic).

I trust that no one will use the above plants to relieve any of the listed disorders without consulting their physician. 

Irving W. Knobloch

See also the article by H. S. Puri, in the Journal, v. 60, pp. 137-143 (1970) ed. note.

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Many people have asked where they can go to see a variety of ferns. What is perhaps the largest collection of ferns in the United States is at Longwood Gardens, in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. Recently, Dr. Donald Huttleston took inventory of the ferns there and reports 284 taxa of pteridophytes. Most of these are on public display. The majority are indoor (non-hardy) ferns in the greenhouse, but some are outside, including some interesting Japanese species. The variety in the "Fern Passage" greenhouse is amazing. Longwood is easy to reach (right on U.S. 1) and open every day of the year, the conservatories from 11:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., the outdoor gardens from 8:00 A.M. to sunset. There is no charge. 

J. Montgomery

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Send any material for News and Views to:

Dr. James D. Montgomery
Biology Department
Upsala College
East Orange, New Jersey 07019

We would like to hear from more of the members!

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I have been informed that the useful "Fern Flora of the Philippines" by E. B. Copeland is still available for sale. Since there are only a few fern floras of tropical areas that are as complete as this, interested persons will be well advised to get this while it is still in print. It forms Monograph 6 of the National Institute of Science and Technology (vol. 1, 1958; vols. 2 and 3, 1960) and is sold by the Institute (Kahong Koreo Building 774, Manila, Philippines) for $4.75 including postage, which is a real bargain. 

C. V. Morton

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New Members

Mr. Charles Anderson
Miss Harriet J. Anderson
Mrs. Frank M. Bambridge
Mr. David S. Barrington
Mrs. G. W. Bentrup
Dr. S. Bhambie, Dept. of Botany, B.I.T.S., Pilani Rai., INDIA
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Dr. Mary B. Brown
Mrs. Willyer Brown
Mr. Oscar Carrington, Jr.
Dr. Frank S. Cresswhite, Boyce Thompson S.W. Arboretum, Univ. of Arizona, P.O. Box 8, Superior, Arizona 85273
Mr. J. F. Duesby
Mrs. James L. Eagan
Mr. Ronald Eager, Pacific Bamboo Gardens, 4754 Vista Lane, San Diego, California 92116
Mr. Kendrick G. Felling
Miss Linda H. Fanning
Mrs. L. E. Irwin
Miss Marvin Jarden

Mr. Bert E. Hilliken

Mr. John Peterson
Miss Marie A. Peterson
Dr. Raymond L. Peterson, The Morton Arboretum, Lisle Illinois 60532
Mr. John Markham Robin, La Trobe University, Bundoora 3083, Victoria, AUSTRALIA
Mr. Gordon K. Starkweather

Mr. Frederick L. Vorbeck

Mr. Mervyn B. Walsn
Mr. Ronald R. Weedon

Changes of Address

Mr. Samuel C. Johason
Dr. Robert M. Lloyd, Dept. of Botany, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio 45701
Mr. Robert Magill,
Mr. Hideaki Ohba, Botanical Garden, Tohoku University, Sendai 980, JAPAN
Mr. Wilbur W. Olson
Dr. Fred R. Rickson, Dept. of Botany & Plant Path., Oregon State Univ., Corvallis, Oregon 97331
Mr. Thomas A. Zanoni, Dept. of Botany & Plant Path., Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado 80521