Hardy Ferns

Hardy Perennial Ferns
Ferns are among the oldest plants in the world. They are similar to mosses (bryophytes) in that they do not flower or set seed, instead reproducing via spores. However, unlike mosses, they are vascular plants, just as are the other perennials, as well as trees and shrubs, you have growing in your garden.

Why Plant Ferns?
Some of the most delicate texture, as well as some of the richest shades of green, and even red and purple, can be attained in the shade garden by planting ferns. While many ferns are tropical and subtropical plants, grown indoors in our area, there are a number of temperate types that are very hardy for our outdoor gardens. Some ferns are quite large plants, making dramatic backdrops or looking great planted under large trees, while others are smaller and best suited to the middle or front of a shady border.

Growing Ferns
Ferns are not difficult to grow, you simply must ensure that you are planting them in the right area. Ferns are universally woodland plants, implying a need for shade and cool, moist soil. They can be planted anywhere that is protected from hot afternoon sun, including northern or eastern exposures, or under trees or large shrubs. Many ferns can even grow in full shade. However, sunny, hot or dry areas are not good spots for them.

The soil should be rich, moist, and well-drained. Heavy clay-based soils can be loosened with compost and/or peat. Another great product is coir, sold as Beats Peat or coco-peat. A layer of mulch over top of the soil can help keep it cool and moist in the heat of summer.

Ensure that ferns are watered well until established, keeping them consistently moist. Once established they do not need as much attention to their moisture requirements, but they should still receive ample water during the heat of the summer. Ferns are not heavy feeders but appreciate a monthly application of 20-20-20 during the growing season.
Types of Hardy Ferns

Lady Fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*)
The feathery foliage of lady fern adds an elegant touch to the landscape. A medium-sized species, there are several different cultivars that have varying leaf shapes. A very hardy choice for our area. Ht: 24” Sp: 24” Zone 2

Japanese Painted Fern (*Athyrium niponicum f. pictum*)
This small fern features graceful foliage in shades of purple, silver, and bronze. The most colourful of the ferns that will grow in our area, but slightly more tender than others. Plants should be in a sheltered area and mulched for the winter months. Ht: 12” Sp: 12” Zone 4

Male Fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*)
One of the more compact ferns, this is also one of the easiest to grow. Triangular fronds are a rich green colour and form large mounds. Ht: 18-24” Sp: 18-24” Zone 2

Ostrich Fern (*Matteucia struthiopteris*)
The hardiest and largest fern available, this creates a dramatic backdrop in any shady area and is very easy to grow. Plants grow quickly, making them a perfect filler for large gardens, yet can be easily controlled in smaller spaces. Ht:36-48” Sp:36” Zone 2

Sensitive Fern (*Onoclea sensibilis*)
The broad leaflets on this spreading fern give it a heavier substance than many others. Can go dormant during hot, dry periods in summer, provide rich soil in a cool, shady spot. 36-48” Zone 2

Cinnamon Fern (*Osmunda cinnamomea*)
This larger fern has thick, rich green fronds. The spore-bearing fronds are a dark cinnamon-brown colour, and rise out of the center of the plants. Very hardy and easy to grow. Ht: 36” Sp: 36” Zone 2
Royal Fern (Osmunda regalis)
Native all over the Northern Hemisphere, Royal Fern is one of the largest and most spectacular species for the garden. It forms an upright clump with tall, bright green fronds. Brown spores are clustered at the end of each leafy frond in a short spike. 36” Zone 3

Christmas Fern (Polystichum acrostichoides)
Native to Eastern North America, this is one of the most widely grown garden ferns. Plants form a medium-sized clump of dark-green, leathery fronds. Adapts well to many garden situations, preferring a rich, moist soil. Tolerates summer heat and humidity. Easy and reliable. Ht: 12-24” Sp: 12-24” Zone 3