

POTOWMACK NEWS

Potowmack Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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Native Ferns in Your Virginia Garden: Beautiful and Practical By Kit Sheffield



CINNAMON FERN, *OSMUNDASTRUM CINNAMOMEUM*. ALL PHOTOS FOR THIS ARTICLE BY KIT SHEFFIELD

Ferns can be an excellent addition to your garden, especially if you're looking to support native plant ecosystems.

These ancient plants have been around for over 360 million years and were already ancient when the first flowering plants came along about 150 million years ago. They have survived four major global extinctions - including the largest extinction event we know of, at the end of the Triassic period. They were here for the first dinosaur, and for the last (non-avian) dinosaur.

Their lasting success comes from their adaptability, efficient use of water, relatively low needs for soil nutrients, and a myriad of reproductive strategies, both sexual and asexual, allowing them to spread widely. These characteristics are also ones that make them appealing for home planting. Incorporating ferns into your garden can help create lush, low-maintenance, self-sustaining landscapes that support local biodiversity, as ferns offer critical habitat for local wildlife and contribute to healthy soil by retaining moisture and preventing erosion.

Why Choose Native Ferns?

Native ferns are adapted to Virginia's climate, soil, and ecology. They therefore typically need little to no supplemental watering (once they are established), fertilizing, or pest control. Because they evolved alongside

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Upcoming

Nature Journaling at Green Spring Gardens with Jen Brown

Friday, June 13, 10 am - noon

Space limited: register under events on the Potowmack Chapter part of vnp.s.org

Grasses & Sedges & More at Runnymede Park, Herndon with the Grass Bunch

Saturday, June 14, 11 am - 1 pm

Walk on level natural surface and paved trails through woods and meadow. Space limited: register under events on the Potowmack Chapter part of vnp.s.org

Huntley Meadows Early Summer Walk with Alonso Abugattas

Saturday, June 28, 10 am-12:30 pm

Learn lore, ethnobotany, and natural history of early summer plants and the wildlife that depends on them. Space limited: register under events on the Potowmack Chapter part of vnp.s.org

Nature Journaling at Green Spring Gardens with Jen Brown

Friday, July 11, 10 am - noon

Space limited: register under events on the Potowmack Chapter part of vnp.s.org

Fern Walk on the Trails of Walker Nature Center with Kit Sheffield

Saturday, July 12, 10 am - 12:30 pm

Beautiful ferns and easy trails, led by fern enthusiast. Registration as above.

Fraser Preserve Trees with Leaves led by Margaret Chatham

Saturday, August 9, 9 am-noon

It seems we always look at trees in winter. Here's a chance to see them with leaves, especially if you bring binoculars. Walk as long as you like up and down on natural surface & gravel, but no restrooms. Registration as above.

Chapter Quarterly Social at Potomac Overlook Park

Saturday, August 23, 1-4 pm

Friends old and new and a walk in the woods. No registration required.

All events are free and open to the public. Walks require preregistration. To receive email notices about upcoming events, subscribe to our mailing list at <https://vnp.s.org/groups.io/g/potowmack> You can also send a blank email to potowmack+subscribe@vnp.s.org

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Subscribe to our Potowmack Chapter email discussion group to receive and send email about native plants in our area including questions, answers, and discussions. You don't have to be a VNPS member and there are no ads. Over 350 members strong! Just send a blank email to potowmack+subscribe@vnps.groups.io. Visit <https://vnps.groups.io/g/potowmack> to look around.



Check out the Potowmack Chapter Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/vnpspot>.

Wildlife Sanctuary Program (formerly Audubon at Home)

Remember Audubon at Home? The program through the Audubon Society of Northern Virginia in which you could get guidance on how to make your yard more wildlife-friendly, and if you succeeded to the extent of being able to observe at least ten species of interest using your yard, you could certify your yard as a wildlife sanctuary and purchase a yard sign to advertise your success to neighboring humans. Well, the program still exists, but the names have changed, and with them URLs to find it on line. To request that an "ambassador" from the (now) Northern Virginia Bird Alliance visit you to help you sort out which of your plants are native, which are exotics that generally stay where they are planted, and which are invasive exotics that want to take over our world, you now go to <https://www.nvbirdalliance.org/wildlife-sanctuary-program> (I have yet to figure out how to get there from the basic [nvbirdalliance.org](https://www.nvbirdalliance.org) website.)

Or if you just want to check for yourself whether those plants some nursery or neighbor told you were native are really native [here](#) or just native somewhere, you can go to the Digital Atlas of the Virginia Flora: <https://vaplantatlas.org/>. For every plant with vouchered specimens in a recognized herbarium, there will be a map of Virginia with a dot in every county where it is vouchered to occur: red dots for native plants, blue dots for introduced plants, and gray dots when the powers that be can't be sure how long the plant has been there. Of course the vouchering process introduces some lag to the listing of newly invasive plants, and plants that are not found in the wild won't be listed here at all.

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FERNS FROM PAGE 1

local wildlife, native ferns contribute to a healthy ecosystem by providing food, habitat and shelter for insects, birds, and small animals such as toads. Additionally, our local ferns are perennials, so once they are established they will come back year after year. And as a major bonus, most local ferns are deer resistant.

Many of our ferns are especially suited to shady or woodland areas – the very areas that can be the most difficult spots to fill. But if you have a sunny spot to deal with, there are ferns that will thrive there, too. Have an area that is wet all year? There is a fern for that. And ranging in size from head-high to knee-high, ferns can fill a lot of roles in your yard, from creating natural screening, to providing a layered appearance, to giving year-round interest (many local species are evergreen).

Some Good Native Ferns for Virginia Gardens

Cinnamon Fern (*Osmundastrum cinnamomeum*)

A dramatic fern with upright, arching fronds, cinnamon fern gets its name from the cinnamon-colored fertile fronds that appear in the center of the plant in spring. It frequently occurs in wetlands and prefers moist soil, but can also grow quite well in dry areas. Its large leaves – which can grow as tall as a person – provide beauty in spring and summer, and they turn a lovely golden yellow in the autumn before dying back in winter. The hairs that appear on the leaf rachises (left) are collected by birds and incorporated into nests.



Cinnamon Fern has a bit of a look-alike, Interrupted Fern (*Claytosmunda claytoniana*), which naturally occurs in areas a bit dryer than Cinnamon Fern. It lacks the hairs on the rachis and the 'cinnamon stick' fertile fronds of Cinnamon Fern, but provides much of the same beauty.



Southern Lady Fern (*Athyrium asplenoides*, left), **Hay-scented Fern** (*Dennstaedtia punctilobula*), and **New York Fern** (*Amauropelta noveboracensis*) are a trio of knee- to thigh-high ferns that produce particularly lacy-looking leaves. New York Ferns will do best in shade to dappled shade, and have

an overall leaf shape that tapers both at the tip and the base – a relatively uncommon shape in our ferns. Hay-scented Fern will do best with a lot of sun. They are covered in small, glandular hairs and allegedly are quite fragrant – although not to me.



Both New York Ferns (above) and Hay-scented Ferns will slowly spread asexually and can form quite large patches. Lady Ferns do well in mixed sun and shade, and are often found mixed in with patches of New York or Hay-scented Ferns.



Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*, above) is another knee-high fern, but it doesn't have the laciness of the other ferns discussed so far. However, it is evergreen (hence the 'Christmas' in the name), so provides some visual interest throughout the year.

Christmas Ferns are in the Wood Fern family, Dryopteridaceae. Some other members of this family are also evergreen, notably Marginal Wood Fern (*Dryopteris marginalis*)

and Intermediate Wood Fern (aka Evergreen Wood Fern, *Dryopteris intermedia*). However, in an especially harsh winter, the above-ground leaves of the *Dryopteris* species may die back to the ground.

All the members of this family in our area grow with multiple leaves emanating from the same point, and growing into a crown or vase shape. And all of them can spread asexually, but normally do so very slowly, making them easy to control.

... And a Couple to Use with Caution

Sensitive Fern (*Onoclea sensibilis*) is, paradoxically given the name, an aggressive plant. It can successfully compete in areas that are otherwise overrun by invasives like mile-a-minute, chocolate vine, and honeysuckles. Placed in a garden setting, that aggressiveness can be a decided disadvantage as it can spread and crowd out everything else in the area. Its underground stem may lie very deep, making it is very hard to dig out once established. [Editor's note: my experience in my yard is just the opposite, with roots very close to the surface and easy to move/remove.] The 'sensitive' part of the name refers to cold sensitivity; it will die back to the ground at the first cold snap.

Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) is a sun-loving fern that can also be quite aggressive. It is known to be allelopathic – meaning it produces chemicals that retard the growth and germination of other species. Bracken is also one of our few fern species that have nectar-producing glands. Nectar is normally produced by flowering plants to attract pollinators, but ferns have a completely different reproductive strategy and do not produce flowers or need to attract pollinators. Current speculation is that the nectar glands attract ants, which deter potential plant predatory insects either actively, by attacking them, or passively, their mere presence discouraging some insects from approaching.

Some Last Thoughts

You can generally find most of the fern species listed above at native plant sales. Another good source is 'plant rescues'. When a new road or trail is being built, often the developer will allow a period when people can come and dig up plants that would otherwise be destroyed.

In either case, keep in mind that the act of digging up and replanting is challenging, especially to a young plant. In the best case, you would want to dig up the plant and re-plant it the same day.

Regular watering is often needed during the first season as the plants establish; after that, they can generally be left alone. You can also avoid fertilizers and pesticides.

Most ferns will spread asexually once they are established. It's nice – but not necessary – to give them some room to spread.

Ferns are long-lived perennials; once you have established them in your garden, you can look forward to decades of beauty and grace.

Conservation / Environmentalism Reads

Kathryn Cooper

A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There by Aldo Leopold– Describes Leopold's experiences learning about the ecosystems of this home in Wisconsin and other places in North America. Written in 1949, this book is widely considered one of the most important books on ecology and environmentalism ever written.

Half Earth: our planet's fight for life by E. O. Wilson– argues that humanity is currently causing a sixth mass extinction event, with species disappearing at a rate 1,000 times faster than before the rise of humans. In order to stave off the mass extinction of species, including our own, we must move swiftly to preserve the biodiversity of our planet. He proposes that by dedicating roughly half of the Earth's land and sea to nature reserves, we can save at least 85% of the planet's current biodiversity.

The Invention of Nature: Alexander Humboldt's New World by Andrea Wulf– Biography of Alexander von Humboldt (1769 to 1859) who was the most famous scientist of his age, a visionary German naturalist and polymath whose discoveries changed the way we understand the natural world. The lasting impact of his writings has influenced some of the best minds of the past 200 years– Simon Bolivar, Thomas Jefferson, Darwin, Wordsworth, Goethe, Muir, Thoreau, among others. His ideas form the foundation of modern environmentalism.

Guardians of the Valley: John Muir and the Friendship that Saved Yosemite by Dean King–Chronicles the friendship between John Muir, a naturalist and philosopher, and Robert Underwood Johnson, a prominent editor at *The Century Magazine*, and their collaborative efforts to preserve Yosemite. The book explores how they used their combined influence – Muir's love for nature and Johnson's connection to influential media – to fight against mining, logging, and tourism that threatened the valley. This collaboration ultimately led to the creation of Yosemite National Park and the beginning of the American environmental movement.

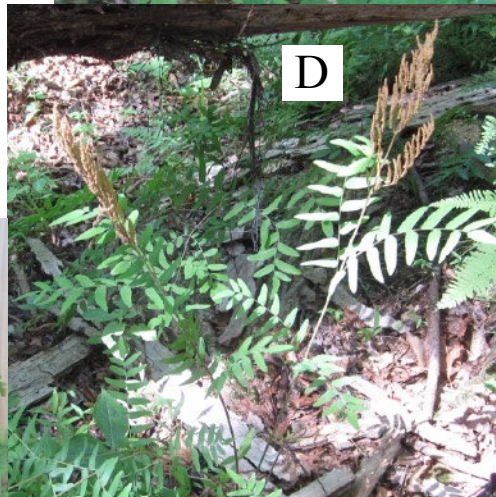
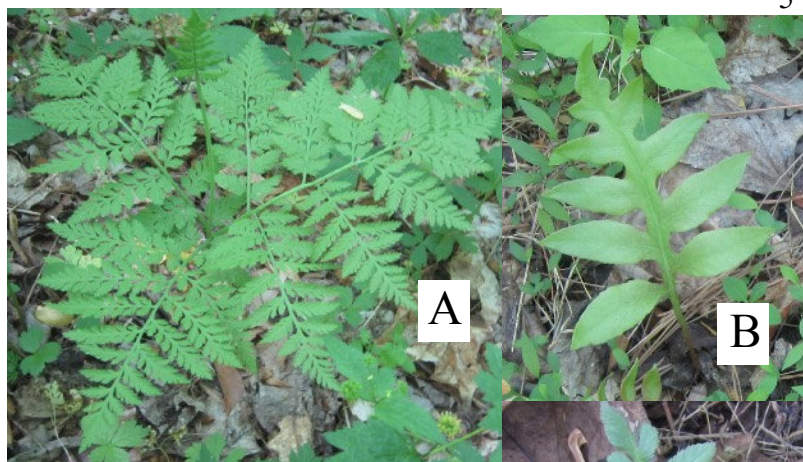
Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest by Suzanne Simard–A memoir that explores the interconnectedness of trees through a network of underground fungi, known as mycorrhizal networks. Simard, a forest ecologist, details her research and personal journey, revealing how trees communicate, cooperate, and even "remember" through these networks, with older, larger "mother trees" playing a crucial role in their vitality. She challenges conventional forestry practices and highlights the importance of understanding these interconnected systems for sustainable forest management.

The Hidden Life of Trees: What they Feel, How they Communicate by Peter Wohlleben–Influenced by the work of Suzanne Simard; explores the complex social and communicative lives of trees within a forest ecosystem. It highlights how trees form "wood wide web" networks through their roots and fungi, sharing resources and information. The book also examines how trees nurture their offspring, communicate through various signals, and protect themselves from harm.

Ferns

A random sampling of local ferns I had photos of. Not even close to the same scale. Photos by Margaret Chatham. Answers on page 6.

- 1 *Adiantum pedatum*, Maidenhair Fern
- 2 *Amauropelta novaboracensis*, New York Fern
- 3 *Botrypus virginianus*, Rattlesnake Fern
- 4 *Dryopteris carthusiana*, Spinulose Wood Fern
- 5 *Matteuccia struthiopteris*, Ostrich Fern
- 6 *Onoclea sensibilis*, Sensitive Fern
- 7 *Ophioglossum pycnostichum*, Adder's Tongue
- 8 *Osmunda spectabilis*, Royal Fern
- 9 *Osmundastrum cinnamomeum*, Cinnamon Fern
- 10 *Polystichum acrostichoides*, Christmas Fern
- 11 *Sceptridium dissectum*, Cut-leaf Grape Fern
- 12 *Woodwardia areolata*, Netted Chain Fern — oops, new name: *Lorinseria areolata*



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Word of the Month: Ramet



Merriam-Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines ramet as "an independent member of a clone." I'm not sure I'd call it independent: it's a stalk or trunk that looks like a separate plant above ground, but is connected to the common root system of a clone. Quaking aspens in the West are the largest and most famous clonal trees, with thousands of ramets. In my own yard I have several clonal trees: Bladdernut, *Staphylea trifolia*, shown at left, Pawpaw, *Asimina triloba*, Tupelo, *Nyssa sylvatica*, Silky dogwood, *Cornus amomum*, and Wax Myrtle, *Morella cerifera*.— Margaret Chatham

Answers to puzzle on page 5: 1-C; 2-G "burning the candle at both ends"; 3-A it's hard to see, but this one does have a fertile frond rising from where the sterile frond starts spreading; 4-K length of the innermost pinnule on the lowest branch is important to identification; 5-F this one didn't make a fertile "ostrich plume" this year; 6-I; 7-L yes, it's a fern; 8-D fertile portions of frond at the tips will wither after spores are spread; 9-H separate fertile "cinnamon stick" will also die back after dispersing spores; 10-J narrower tips are fertile portions of the fronds; 11-E two forms of the same species: forma obliquum above, forma dissectum below; 12-B.