Growing Indoor Ferns

Ferns are non-flowering houseplants that are grown for foliage which can take many forms: from the delicate Boston fern to the tough and leathery fronds of the Bear paw fern. As members of the Polypodiopsoda class, ferns are vascular plants that reproduce by means of spores. They have complex leaves that uncoil from fiddleheads into fronds. Although they are native to tropical and sub-tropical rainforests ferns are easy to grow and maintain. Ferns require indirect sunlight, moist soil, and a humid atmosphere.

Growing Medium
Ferns prefer potting soil with good drainage and high organic content. A potting mix should have peat moss or sphagnum for moisture retention, sand or gravel for drainage, and sterilized bagged garden loam or potting soil. Add 1/2 ounce of dolomitic limestone to each gallon of soil mix and 1 tablespoon of bone meal or 20% superphosphate. See Potting Media for additional info.

Container Selection
Choose a container with a size proportionate to the plant keeping in mind that most ferns have a shallow root system. A plant is too small for its pot may drown in the excess water held in the soil. There should be roughly one inch of space between the root system and the sides of the container. Ferns may need to be repotted often but wait until it seems overcrowded. Any pot used should have a drainage hole at the base of the container to remove excess water. Do not put stones or broken crockery into the bottom of a container as a method of drainage. This will actually create an environment where the plants roots will sit in water-logged planting medium. A coffee basket filter placed in the bottom before the soil mix will work well to keep soil from running out of drainage holes. Another option is double potting. Place the fern and potting mix in a permeable container such as a clay pot and then place that container into a larger pot that has a layer of sphagnum moss that will surround the smaller pot. Keep the sphagnum moist.

Light Requirements
Ferns prefer indirect lighting from a north or east-facing window. The intense sunlight from a southern or western exposure may dry out or even scald the foliage. A sheer curtain can reduce light penetration or move the fern far enough from the window to avoid direct sunlight.

Temperature Requirements
Daytime temperatures should average 65-75°F. Nighttime temperatures should be about 10° lower, preferably below 60°F. Higher temperatures may require more frequent watering (see Humidity/Watering).

Humidity/Watering
When temperatures are below 60°F add water only when the soil is dry to the touch. If plants receive too much or too little water, shedding of leaflets will occur. Browning on the tips of the fronds and the yellowing and dropping of interior leaves are all signs of a low humidity. Certain practices, in addition to the double potting mentioned above, can be taken to increase humidity surrounding the plant. See Houseplant Watering Techniques for additional information.
Despite good cultural practices, pests and diseases at times may appear. Chemical control should be used only after all other methods have failed. For pesticide information please call UConn Home and Garden Education Center weekdays, in Connecticut call toll free 877-486-6271. Out of state call 860-486-6271. UConn Home and Garden Education Center, 2017