

Ferns and fern-like plants are certainly an interesting and diverse group of plants, especially in Florida. According to fossil records, ferns are among the world's oldest living plants.

Florida's climate and abundant moisture create growing conditions that are favorable for ferns. Tropical storms have deposited foreign spores to create a rich diversity of fern species. Hawaii is the only state to exceed Florida in the number fern species.

We have an estimated 123 native fern and fern-like species. Agricultural and urban land uses have expanded, and now 43 of these species are endangered.

Ferns have become very popular in the home landscape. Their ability to grow in areas of dense shade, under trees, and along north sides of buildings has made them very useful to gardeners. Their graceful appearance has made them a desirable addition to the landscape, as well.

In general, most ferns require an acidic soil. The soil moisture should be constant, except for a few ferns that will tolerate moderate drought. Ferns do not tolerate high fertilization and will suffer leaf scorch if fertilized too much. Fortunately, they are relatively pest free plants, because they are easily injured by insecticides and fungicides applications.

The Autumn fern is a lovely addition to the landscape. The name actually refers to the 'autumn-like' colors of the fresh, unfolding foliage. This slow growing fern will reach a height of 2-3 feet and will remain semi-evergreen. Trim back the brown fronds in late winter to make way for the copper and orange spring growth. The autumn fern likes moderate moisture and part to full shade.

A fern with unique foliage resembling a pea plant is the Royal fern, *Osmunda regalis*. The delicate bright green fronds are often topped with golden colored pinnae that resemble dried flower stalks. This fern can grow to 5 feet and looks right at home around a pond or water feature. It needs acidic soil with constant moisture.

The Resurrection fern is a very interesting air plant living in tree branches. This drought tolerant native fern will brown and curl when dry, but will open new fronds as soon as it receives moisture. To learn more about plants, visit the Columbia County Master Gardeners at the fair or call 752-5384. (Published 10-31-10)