

Photo

Holly Fern Dresses up a Shady Corner



Photo: *Cyrtomium falcatum* 'Rochfordianum' (Holly Fern) by Plant Delights Nursery

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Most folks in the South know holly fern. It is as well suited to the South as live oaks and magnolias. However, since it hails from Asia , South Africa , and Polynesia , we cannot claim it as one of our natives. Hardy from Zones 6 - 10, it can withstand temperatures as low as 14° F.

Holly fern (*Cyrtomium falcatum*) is an excellent choice for a potted specimen in a shaded corner. It tucks nicely into pockets of soil in rock gardens and is a good groundcover in shady or woodland locations. It makes an excellent understory plant beneath old reclaimed plants like camellia, sweet olive, hollies, and other large shrubs which have had their lower branches removed.

Holly fern is exceedingly well mannered in the garden. Growth rate is moderate, and plants do not usually need to be divided. However, old established clumps can be divided if desired. Lustrous stiff, erect to arching fronds radiate out from the center of the plants to form attractive clumps. Individual fronds grow from 20 to 30 inches long and up to eight inches wide. Plants grow two to three feet high and spread out to about three feet wide.

Leaves of holly fern are thicker than other ferns, so it stands up to coastal breezes without tattering. This characteristic also makes it very useful for those who garden in salt air or use a saline water supply.

Partial to full shade suits it best, and it truly shines in loose, fertile, moist soil with a high organic matter content. Follow a regular watering schedule during the first growing season to establish a deep, extensive root system. Fertilize in late winter with a general all-purpose garden fertilizer. Appearance is enhanced if browning fronds are removed from time to time. Winter-damaged fronds can be cut back in February before new spring growth begins in March.

Photo

Like some other ferns, holly fern is attractive in floral designs. However, as with other ferns, caution is advised. Once I made a very special design for my niece's wedding. I chose holly fern for the line material and wired it into an attractive S-curve. I chose a suitably tall, slender container, and then added flowers to follow the curve and disguise wires I had used to hold the ferns in place. It was quite beautiful, and everyone made admiring comments. I became concerned, however, when I noticed that the linen cloth underneath the design seemed to be getting dirty. I brushed at it, and to my dismay, it smeared and messed up the beautifully starched and ironed tablecloth.

I had forgotten that ferns have sori (clusters of spore cases) on the backs of their leaves. When the spores are ripe, the sori shatter and spores are scattered from here to kingdom come. Well, kingdom came right on top of my table. Chalk it up to experience. Now when I use ferns in designs I check the backs of the leaves. If the sori are dark, they are about ready to pop. As long as they are green, they can safely be used in floral designs.

Cultivars include 'Butterfieldii', with deeply serrated leaf margins; 'Compactum', with leaves shorter than the species; and 'Rochfordianum', which has hollylike leaves with coarsely fringed margins. Look in area garden centers for this useful plant. Buy several and plant them in broad sweeps or cover the ground underneath a shady tree. However you choose to use holly fern, it will add grace and beauty to its place in the landscape.

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