

The 10 Biggest Mistakes to Avoid When Growing Ferns in the Houston Metro Area*

by Patrick Hudnall, Texas Gulf Coast Fern Society

- * Picking the wrong fern to plant in the ground. Some ferns grow better in the ground than in pots. Hardy "clumping" ferns are best for planting in the ground. Consider hardiness. A tropical fern without plenty of protection from frost will die. Examples of hardy, clumping ferns are: Japanese Holly Fern (*Crytomium flactum*), most Lady Ferns (*Athyrium filix-fimina*) and Dixie Wood Fern (*Dryopteris x austalis*).
- * Not providing adequate drainage. Few ferns will grow in soil with poor drainage. Raise beds in clay-based soils. Pots must have unblocked drainage holes.
- * Not providing adequate water. Nearly all ferns require good drainage, but constantly moist soil or potting mix. High humidity ferns don't require as much water as in dry climates, so be careful to only keep the soil moist not wet.
- * Not providing adequate shade. Nearly all ferns require some degree of shade. But too deep shade can be fatal for ferns that need at least bright shade or partial shade. Check cultural requirements for your ferns. One caution about shade is that it often comes with a lack of air circulation. Air circulation is important for insect control.
- * Letting bugs get the upper hand. Keep an eye out for snails, caterpillars, mealy bugs and scale. When treating for pests read the instructions or seek the guidance of experts.
- * Not providing protection from the "Elements" dogs, kids or traffic. Though some ferns will handle a bit of neglect, none handle abuse



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* Limiting purchases to national plant department inventories. Local/regional nurseries, especially Another-Place-in-Time or Cornelius Nursery, offer much broader selections. Fern Society sales and events like Tropical Treasures are great sources of ferns. If you search online for ferns your selection becomes vast. Do your homework before buying online. Some ferns have very specific cultural requirements.

* Not trying semi-tropical plants. Usually all semi-tropical ferns need is protection from our winter frosts. From mid-May to mid-September our climate is very much like tropical lowlands. Staghorn Ferns (*Platycerium*) are a good example of Tropical to Subtropical ferns that are easily adapted to our area.

* Not getting assistance from experts, books or on-line. The [Texas Gulf Coast Fern Society](#) members offer a wealth of knowledge on grow all kinds of ferns. One of the most authoritative books available on growing ferns is the [Fern Grower's Manual by Barbara Joe Hoshizaki and Robbin C. Moran](#)

* Using too strong a fertilizer. Most ferns do not grow in especially fertile soil. If ferns are forced to grow fast they tend to become more susceptible to damage by fungus, insects, cold, sun and drought. In general ferns are somewhat fragile. I recommend using natural fertilizers such as "fish emulsion."

The Texas Gulf Coast Fern Society's meetings are at Judson Robinson Jr. Community Center, 2020 Hermann Dr. Visitors are welcome. July 18 Meeting: "Making Moss Balls" presented by Darla Harris and Cherie Lee. Sept 21 Meeting: Annual Plant Exchange. Details: www.tgcfernsoc.org/fern.html or 713-284-1994.