Matteuccia struthiopteris (= Matteuccia pensylvanica) Ostrich Fern (Polypodiaceae)

The elegant Fern, *Matteuccia struthiopteris*, will grow in sun or shade, but does require a moist soil, especially if grown in the sun. Ostrich Fern may be a suitable choice for wet areas. Its large leaves resemble ostrich plumes, hence the common name.



General Comments on Ferns: Ferns are among the most adaptable of plants for residential landscapes. They are ideal for ground cover or border plantings in shady areas of the landscape. Ferns are an ancient type of vegetation which occupied the world long before the evolution of seed-producing plants. They are strictly foliage plants, since they reproduce without flowering. Most Ferns used in midwestern and northeastern landscapes are shade-loving woodland types, although there are sun tolerant Ferns available through specialty catalogs. They will thrive best if located near trees, or on the east or north side of a building, where they will receive partial shade. Woodland Ferns may grow quite poorly if subjected to hot afternoon sun. Ferns start growth very early in the spring, and retain their delicate leafy foliage until several light frosts freeze them back in the autumn. They are quite free from disease or insect pests, and thus are easy to grow in the native gardens or border plantings. Woodland Ferns grow best in a soil which has a high humus content, almost pure leaf mold is ideal. The average garden soil may be made suitable for ferns by adding liberal quantities of peat moss or compost.

FEATURES

Form

- -large fern (foliage perennial)
- -to 5' tall x 2' wide
- -upright clump of huge radiating fronds

Culture

- -all Ferns need deep, rich, humus-laden, moist soil that has good drainage, in partial to full shade-ferns typically do not do well in dry, hot sites, especially those with too much sun
- -Ostrich Fern is one that particularly needs constant moisture to avoid leaf scorch
- -provided ample moisture, this plant can grow in sunny sites
- -Polypody Family (the largest family of Ferns), with few disease or pest problems (crown rot can occur in poorly drained soils)

- -propagated by division
- -widely available in containers

Foliage

- -pinnately compound
- -fronds: consisting of a central midrib and leaflets called pinnae
- -unfurling in mid-spring as large light green fiddleheads
- -dying back to the ground in late autumn
- -autumn color is the same as summer
- -sometimes a new flush of growth emerges in autumn, to replace the fronds that have dried in the summer

Flowers

-not applicable (Ferns do not produce flowers)

Fruits

-not applicable (Ferns do not produce fruits)

USAGE

Function

-tall growing accent foliage perennial for shady conditions found at north- or east-facing foundations, under large trees, in woodlands, or at the border

Texture

- -bold texture
- -thick density

Assets

- -large fronds yielding a bold texture
- -plant for fully or partially shaded sites

Liabilities

-prone to leaf scorch during heat and drought

Habitat

- -Zone 4
- -Native to Eastern U.S.

SELECTIONS

Alternates

-other plants for full shade or dappled shade situations, including ferns (Athyrium, Matteuccia, Osmunda, Polystichum, etc.), perennials (Astilbe, Brunnera macrophylla, Hosta, Pulmonaria, Stylophorum diphyllum, etc.), or groundcovers (Gaultheria procumbens, Hedera helix, Mitchella repens, Symphytum grandiflorum, Vinca minor, etc.)

Variants

- -Ferns are only rarely available as cultivars; most can be found only as the species form.
- -Ostrich Fern is often listed as *M. pensylvanica* (incorrectly spelled *M. pennsylvanica*)