

Ferns Are for Lovers!

Ferns are over 400 million years old, and they are **not** flowering plants. Fronds are the leaves on these primitive, seedless, vascular plants. Fern is from the Anglo-Saxon, meaning feathery. Ferns are associated with invisibility, premonition, wealth, luck, and love. As late as the 17th century, botanists did not know how ferns reproduced. This led to the lore of their aptitude for concealment. If one dreamt of ferns, it was a sign of rebirth and upcoming change. They warded off evil. In Slavik, Baltic, and Scandinavian legend, ferns are potent symbols of fertility. A longstanding tradition exists where on the Summer Solstice, young couples in love go looking for the mythical *fern flower* by romping through the sylvan forests. It is seeking a fantasy like a unicorn. Infants conceived on the shortest night of the year are called “fern flower” babies. It is still a euphemism for love and sex today. In Finland, the *Fern Flower* is the key agency that counsels young couples on reproductive issues.

Ancients saw a unique *gametophyte* stage---a thin, chlorophyll green, 2-5 mm, heart-shape intermediate—that led to the emergence of fronds. This heart-shape galvanized the link to romance. Technically, this haploid stage has both male and female organs, each contributing one-half of the inheritable chromosomes. With sufficient moisture, the sperm swim to a nearby neighboring egg to complete the sexual union. The fertilized zygote becomes a dividing embryo growing into an independent plant or *sporophyte* [diploid: one set copy of chromosomes from each parent in every cell] which cannibalizes its staging platform for nutrients. Mature ferns store rust-hued spores on the underside of fertile fronds in an encasement known as *sorus*. One 25-inch frond with rows of *sori* can release 7 million spores. In late Summer, the spores are catapulted into the air to be spread by wind or by rain to regenerate the haploid phase. In sexual reproduction, it takes a two-generation cycle to complete the fern’s life cycle.

In droughts, or in hardships, some ferns multiply by asexual reproduction without fertilization. The spore develops independently into a sporophyte plant as a clone with a full complement of chromosomes matching that of the single parent. Ferns also multiply through spreading rhizomes that sprout new ferns, and by frond tips drooping to touch the ground to implant sprigs of new baby ferns. They too are identical to the propagating parent.

Most species of ferns excel in deep shade and wet environments. Deer, unless starving typically avoid eating them. Native varieties easily found can be propagated for free. Most ferns grow in clumps of three or four fronds. Simply snip off the fronds about an inch

aboveground, use a sharp spade to dig up and then replant in moist soil; the node cluster of rhizomes or subterranean stems will spread horizontally, and bear new fronds at intervals. True roots will eventually arise from the creeping, thread-like rhizomes. Water them often.

The *fern flower* does bloom on Midsummer Eve [June 21] for it blossoms unseen in the imagination of lovers of plants who wish to believe. Akin to what the *Lovin' Spoonfuls* asked in their hit 1960s song: *Do you believe in magic?*

Ferns do add magic greenery to any shadowy spots hidden in a landscape, and we all can take that...well, to heart.

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References:

Ferns-Wikipedia