Rhode Island Ferns
— an article about the ferns found in RI. —

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Introduction

William W. Bailey, a 19th century Brown University botanist, described Rhode Island ferns as bewitching plants of very various habitats waving their broad plumes in the swamps or nestling under walls. He wrote of the rigid and glossy, evergreen Christmas Fern and the Maidenhair Fern with its polished ebony stems and light graceful sprays. Bailey listed forty species of ferns growing in Rhode Island. Our list is comprised of forty-six species plus six hybrids. Most of these hybrids are produced within the genus Dryopteris, Wood Ferns.

Unlike flowering plants, ferns grow from spores, not seeds. Spores may be produced on the undersides of fronds or on separate stalks. When mature, the spores fall to the ground and germinate to produce the gametophyte generation in the life cycle of the fern. The gametophyte, also called prothallus, contains the structures which produce the sperm and the egg. Fertilization of the egg by the sperm results in the production of a sporophyte. This is the generation in the life cycle of the fern which we know as the “adult fern”.

Our ferns range in size from the tiny Least Moonwort (Botrychium simplex) which may be as small as one and one-half inches tall to Cinnamon Fern (Osmunda cinnamomea) which can grow up to six feet tall.

Ferns grow in various habitats ranging from woods or swamps to fields and cliffs. Some grow on limestone cliffs, others on granite cliffs. One of our native ferns can climb to the height of twenty feet. One species, a cliff dweller, has evolved the ability to walk down moss-covered rocks by producing new plants at the tips of its fronds. Habitat information for each species is contained in the pages that follow. In addition, the counties in which the ferns grow and the state status are included.

Francis Underwood
May 2011
The information on Rhode Island Ferns come from several sources. The dates for mature spores are based on Seymour’s “Flora of New England”. The county and status information is from Rick Enser’s Rare Plants of RI and, for ferns not on the Rare Plant List, the status is taken from Gil George’s Rhode Island Botanical Survey Check List, published in 1999. Francis Underwood provided habitat information and Don Lubin made sure the nomenclature was up-to-date and has added the identification notes.

**RI Rare Plant Status (used only in RI)**

**SE State Endangered.** Native species in imminent danger of extirpation from Rhode Island. In general, these species have 1 or 2 known or estimated total populations in the state. Plants listed as State Endangered are protected under the provisions of the Rhode Island State Endangered Species Act, Title 20 of the General Laws of the State of Rhode Island.

**ST State Threatened.** Native species which are likely to become State Endangered in the future if current trends in habitat loss or other detrimental factors remain unchanged. In general, these species have 3-5 known or estimated populations and are especially vulnerable to habitat loss.

**SC State Concern.** Native species not considered to be State Endangered or Threatened at the present time, but are listed due to various factors of rarity and/or vulnerability.

**SH State Historical.** Native species which have been documented for Rhode Island during the last 150 years but for which there are no extant populations.

For Plants not on the RI Rare Plant List

- **C** - Common
- **A** - Abundant
- **F** - Frequent
- **U** - Uncommon
- **O** - Occasional
- **R** - Rare
Botanical Name: **Adiantum pedatum**  
Common Name: *Maidenhair Fern*  
Habitat: Rich woods  
Spores can be found: July to September  

State Status: **U**  
Number of sites in State: —  
Counties found in: Providence, Kent, Washington

Notes from Don Lubin: Unique, delicate frond shape. Dark wiry stems were used to make baskets.

Photo credits for this page: upper: Gil George; lower: kbarton
Botanical Name: Asplenium montanum
Common Name: Mountain Spleenwort
Habitat: Non-calcareous rocks
Spores can be found: 5/25 — 8/18

State Status: SE
Number of sites in State: 1
Counties found in: Providence

Notes from Don Lubin: Small fern, rare in New England.

Photo credit for this page: ©Francis Underwood 2011
Botanical Name: **Asplenium platyneuron**

Common Name: *Ebony Spleenwort*

Habitat: Thin soils of rocky slopes

Spores can be found: 7/17 — 10/29

State Status: **A**
Number of sites in State: —
Counties found in: **All**

Notes from Don Lubin:
Dark stipe and rachis, pinnae eared like Christmas fern.
Botanical Name: **Asplenium rhizophyllum**

Common Name: *Walking Fern*

Habitat: Shaded high pH rocks

Spores can be found:

5/13 — 10/1

State Status: **SE**
Number of sites in State: 1
Counties found in: **Providence**

Notes from Don Lubin:

Grows flat on rock surface. New plants grow from frond tips.

Note the small plant growing at the tip of the frond

Photo credits for this page: kbarton
Asplenium trichomanes
*Maidenhair Spleenwort*

Rock crevices and shaded ledges

6/13 — 8/20

**State Status:** SC

**Number of sites in State:** 9

**Counties found in:** Providence, Kent, Washington

Notes from Don Lubin:
Lovely little fern with dark stipe and rachis. Pinnae not eared.
Botanical Name:  
*Athyrium filix-femina* (L.) Roth ex Mert.

Common Name:  
*Lady Fern*

Habitat:  
Moist to wet woodlands

Spores can be found:  
7/14 — 9/8

State Status:  
C

Number of sites in State:  —

Counties found in:  All

Notes from Don Lubin:
Propagates readily by spores, grows unbidden in lawns. Curved sori form herringbone pattern.
Botanical Name: **Botrychium dissectum**
Common Name: *Cut-leaf Grape Fern*
Habitat: Dry to moist woodlands
Spores can be found: 7/23 — 9/25 (10/2)

State Status: **O**
Number of sites in State: —
Counties found in: **All**

Notes from Don Lubin:
Degree of cutting highly variable.
Emerges midsummer, changes from green to bronze in late autumn.
Botanical Name: Botrychium lanceolatum
Common Name: Narrow Triangle Moonwort
Habitat: Mesic woodlands
Spores can be found: (6/14) 6/24 — 8/31 (9/17)
State Status: SC
Number of sites in State: 2
Counties found in: Providence, Kent, Washington

Notes from Don Lubin: Wide tropophore projects at right angle, sporophore branched.

Photo credits for this page: left: ©Francis Underwood 2011; right: W. Carl Taylor @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / USDA NRCS. 1992. Western wetland flora: Field office guide to plant species. West Region, Sacramento
Botanical Name: *Botrychium matricarifolium*
Common Name: Daisyleaf Moonwort
Habitat: Deciduous woodlands and rarely open areas
Spores can be found: (6/13) 6/24 — 8/20
State Status: SC
Number of sites in State: 4
Counties found in: Providence, Kent, Washington
Notes from Don Lubin: Narrow tropophore projects at acute angle, sporophore unbranched.
**Botrychium multifidum**  
*Leathery Grape Fern*

Habitat: Fields or openings in woodlands

Spores can be found: 7/21 — 9/23

State Status: R  
Reported found but no sites listed.

Number of sites in State: ?

Counties found in: ?

Notes from Don Lubin: Stipe particularly stout, pinnules overlap, smaller towards frond tips.

Photo credit for this page: Shauna M. Hee, USFS.
Botanical Name: Botrychium oneidense
Common Name: Blunt-lobed Grape Fern
Habitat: Moist to wet woodlands and swamps
Spores can be found: 7/23 — 9/25 (10/2)
State Status: SH
Number of sites in State: 0 (1899)
Counties found in: Providence
Notes from Don Lubin: Pinnules rounder than B. dissectum. Does not turn bronze in autumn.

Photo credits for this page: Don Lubin
Botanical Name: **Botrychium simplex**

Common Name: *Least Moonwort*

Habitat: Moist fields and woodlands

Spores can be found: 6/26 — 8/8

State Status: **R**

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in: **Providence, Kent, Washington**

Notes from Don Lubin:

a moonwort, not a grape fern

Photo credits for this page: Steve Matson
Botanical Name: **Botrychium tenebrosum**
Common Name: *Shade-loving Moonwort*

Habitat: Shaded woodlands

Spores can be found: 6/26 — 8/8

State Status: R
Number of sites in State: 1
Counties found in: Kent (?)

Notes from Don Lubin:

Photo credits for this page: Michael A. Rosenthal
Botanical Name: **Botrychium virginianum**  
**Rattlesnake Fern**  
Common Name: Rattlesnake Fern  
Habitat: Rich woodlands  
Spores can be found: 6/13 — 8/14  
State Status: O  
Number of sites in State: —  
Counties found in: Providence, Kent, Washington  
Notes from Don Lubin: Largest, most ‘fernlike’ of the Botrychium, with horizontal three-part frond like Bracken. Spore stalk rises from center of frond.
Botanical Name: Cystopteris protrusa
Common Name: Southern Bladder Fern
Habitat: On rich soil of woodlands
Spores can be found: 6/24 — 9/9
State Status: Possibly in RI
Number of sites in State: —
Counties found in: —
Notes from Don Lubin: Generally grows in soil rather than from rock crevices.

Photo credit for this page: Don Lubin
Botanical Name: **Cystopteris tenuis**

Common Name: *Fragile Fern*

Habitat:

On rocks and sometimes on shaded walls with mortar

Spores can be found: 6/24 — 9/9

State Status: O

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in:

**Providence, Kent, Washington, Newport**

Notes from Don Lubin:

Delicate ‘airy’ blade. Grows only occasionally in soil, more often on rocks.

Photo credits for this page: ©Francis Underwood 2011
Botanical Name: **Dennstaedtia punctilobula**

Common Name: *Hay-scented Fern*

Habitat: Ubiquitous in fields, rocks and woodlands

Spores can be found: 7/1 — 9/15

State Status: **C**

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in: **All**

Notes from Don Lubin:
Fronds emerge singly, not in clusters. Note fine white hairs on stipe. Pinnule edges rounded, with no teeth.
Botanical Name: **Deparia acrostichoides**

Common Name:  
*Silvery Spleenwort or Silvery Glade Fern*

Habitat:  
Rich woodlands

Spores can be found:  
7/22 — 9/8 (9/24)

State Status: **F**

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in:  
*Providence, Kent, Washington, Newport*

Notes from Don Lubin:  
Oblong pinnules of equal length.  
Long white hairs on stipe.
Botanical Name: **Dryopteris carthusiana**

Common Name: *Spinulose Wood Fern*

Habitat: Wet or dry woodlands

Spores can be found:

6/27 — 10/11

State Status: **C**

Number of sites in State —

Counties found in: **All**

Notes from Don Lubin:

Turns brown late in fall. Lowest downward pinnule along stipe usually longest.
Botanical Name: **Dryopteris clintoniana**

Common Name: *Clinton’s Wood Fern*

Habitat: Moist woodlands

Spores can be found: 7/8 — 9/8

State Status: *R*
Number of sites in State: —
Counties found in: **Providence**

Notes from Don Lubin:

Larger than *D. cristata*, with longer pinnules less blunt. Fertile pinnae twist less.

**Dryopteris clintoniana** continued on next page.
Dryopteris clintoniana continued from previous page.

Notes from Fran Underwood: Clinton’s Wood Fern originated as a naturally occurring hybrid of Crested Wood Fern (D. cristata) and Goldie’s Fern (D. goldiana). Clinton’s differs from Crested in a few characteristics; the pinnae are longer and more narrowly triangular than in Crested. Also, at least in the sterile fronds of Clinton’s, the blades are more abruptly narrowed at the tip, similar to its Goldie’s Fern parent. Both parent ferns have separate fertile and sterile fronds and in both cases, the sterile fronds are evergreen and the fertile fronds are not.

Photo credit: ©Francis Underwood 2011
Botanical Name: *Dryopteris cristata*

Common Name: Crested Wood Fern

Habitat: Swamps and wetlands

Spores can be found: 7/8 — 9/8

State Status: C

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in: All

Notes from Don Lubin: Narrow fronds, basal pinnae nearly equilateral triangles. Fertile pinnae twist nearly to horizontal.

*Dryopteris cristata* continued on next page.

Photo credits for this page: Louis-M. Landry
Dryopteris cristata
continued from previous page.

Photo credits: ©Francis Underwood 2011
Botanical Name: **Dryopteris goldiana**  
Common Name: *Goldie’s Wood Fern*  
Habitat: Rich woodlands  
Spores can be found: 7/8 — October  

State Status: **Possibly in RI**  
Number of sites in State: —  
Counties found in: —  

Notes from Don Lubin: Fronds often tall, with wide pinnae. Frond and pinnae acuminate at apex.
Botanical Name: *Dryopteris intermedia*
Common Name: **Intermediate Wood Fern**
Habitat: Woodlands
Spores can be found: 6/25 — 9/12

State Status: **C**
Number of sites in State: —
Counties found in: **All**

Notes from Don Lubin: “Fancy”-cut clustered fern of dry hillsides and rocks. Lowest downward pinnule along stipe generally shorter than adjacent pinnule.

Photo credits for this page: left: Lucy Mallary Bugbee; right: ©Francis Underwood 2011
Botanical Name: **Dryopteris marginalis**  
Common Name: Marginal Wood Fern  
Habitat: Rocky woods  
Spores can be found: 7/8 — 10/13  
State Status: C  
Number of sites in State: —  
Counties found in: All  
Notes from Don Lubin: Evergreen fern likes rocks. Stipes very scaly. Pinnule edges untoothed. Sori at very edge of pinnule.

Photo credits for this page: kbarton
Botanical Name: **Dryopteris X bootii**  
*(cristata x intermedia)*

Common Name: *Boot’s Wood Fern*

Habitat: Moist to wet woods

Spores can be found: 7/2 — 10/11

State Status: **U**

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in: **Providence, Washington, Bristol**

Notes from Don Lubin: Basal pinnae not quite so blunt as D. cristata, more dissected.

Photo credit for this page: Lucy Mallary Bugbee
Botanical Name: Dryopteris X burgessii (clintoniana x marginalis)

Common Name: Burgess' Wood Fern

Habitat: Moist to wet woods and swamps

Spores can be found: 7/8 — 10/13

State Status: Possibly in RI

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in: —

Notes from Don Lubin:

Photo credit for this page: Don Lubin
**Botanical Name:** 

Dryopteris X slossonae  
(cristata x marginalis)

**Common Name:**  
Slosson’s Wood Fern

**Habitat:**  
Moist to wet rocky woods

**Spores can be found:**  
July to October

**State Status:**  
R

**Number of sites in State:**  
2

**Counties found in:**  
Providence, Bristol

**Notes from Don Lubin:**  
Sori not quite at pinnule margin. Basal pinnae not quite so blunt as D. cristata. Deformations common.
Botanical Name: **Dryopteris X triploidea**

* (carthusiana x intermedia)

Common Name: **Hybrid Wood Fern**

Habitat: Moist to wet woods and swamps

Spores can be found: 6/26 — 10/17

State Status: **U**

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in: **Bristol, Providence, Washington, Newport**

Notes from Don Lubin: Very common, looks like parents, but often a bit taller.

Photo credit for this page: Don Lubin
Botanical Name: **Dryopteris X uliginosa (carthusiana x cristata)**

Common Name: *Marsh Wood Fern*

Habitat: Moist to wet woods and swamps

Spores can be found: 6/26 — 10/17

State Status: **U**

Number of sites in State: **1**

Counties found in: Providence

Notes from Don Lubin:

Photo credits for this page: center top and right: Michael A. Rosenthal; left: ©Francis Underwood 2011
Botanical Name: Gymnocarpium dryopteris
Common Name: Common Oak Fern
Habitat: Rich woodlands, moss covered wall
Spores can be found: 6/16 — 9/9
State Status: ST
Number of sites in State: 3
Counties found in: Providence, Kent
Notes from Don Lubin: Three-part frond, like small delicate Bracken.

Photo credit for this page: ©Francis Underwood 2011
Botanical Name: **Lygodium palmatum**

Common Name: *Hartford Climbing Fern*

Habitat: Moist woodlands in swamps and river floodplains

Spores can be found: 7/22 — 10/3 (11/19)

State Status: **SC**

Number of sites in State: 6

Counties found in: Providence, Kent, Washington

Notes from Don Lubin:
- Palmate pinnae become miniature at fertile tips. Can climb 20 feet.
- Likes sun.

Photo credit for this page: kbarton
Botanical Name: Matteuccia struthiopteris
Common Name: Ostrich Fern
Habitat: Rich woods along floodplains also in swamps
Spores can be found: 7/12 — September
State Status: SC
Number of sites in State: 5
Counties found in: Providence, Kent
Notes from Don Lubin: Very erect vase-shaped clusters. Fronds widest near apex. Pinnules tiny down nearly to ground.
Botanical Name: **Onoclea sensibilis**

Common Name: *Sensitive Fern*

Habitat: Marshes, swamps and other wet areas

Spores can be found: 7/15 — 9/1

State Status: **C**

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in: **All**

Notes from Don Lubin:

Coarse rounded fronds not cut entirely to rachis. Sterile fronds short, like beaded stalks with no leaf.
Botanical Name: **Ophioglossum pusillum**

Common Name: *Northern Adder’s-tongue*

Habitat: Wet fields, meadows, swamps

Spores can be found: 7/4 — 9/15

State Status: **SE**
Number of sites in State: 1
Counties found in: **Washington**

Notes from Don Lubin:
Short, hides in grass. Look for the fertile fronds. Sterile fronds have no midvein.
Botanical Name: **Osmunda cinnamomea**
Common Name: **Cinnamon Fern**
Habitat: Moist to wet woods
Spores can be found: 5/23 — 7/14 (8/13)
State Status: C
Number of sites in State: —
Counties found in: All

Notes from Don Lubin:
Dramatic fertile fronds generally have no green leaf. Sterile frond and pinna apex acute.
Botanical Name: **Osmunda claytoniana**

Common Name: *Interrupted Fern*

Habitat: Moist to wet woods

Spores can be found:

(5/31) 6/6 — 8/24 (9/7)

State Status: C

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in: All

Notes from Don Lubin:

Frond and pinna apex blunt. Fertile plants easily recognized, if you can find any.
Botanical Name: **Osmunda regalis**
Common Name: *Royal Fern*
Habitat: Wet to mesic soils, swamps and occasionally in dry fields
Spores can be found: (5/30) 6/12 — 9/25

State Status: **C**
Number of sites in State: —
Counties found in: **All**

Notes from Don Lubin:
Likes wet feet. Oval pinnae, looks more like locust than a fern. Fertile pinnae at frond tips.

Photo credits for this page: kbarton
Botanical Name: **Pellaea atropurpurea**  
Common Name: *Purple Cliffbrake*  
Habitat: Crevices in limestone  
Spores can be found: 6/26 — 10/29  
State Status: **SE**  
Number of sites in State: 1  
Counties found in: **Providence**  
Notes from Don Lubin: Stipe dark, pinnae or pinnules oval.

Photo credit for this page: ©Francis Underwood 2011
Botanical Name: Phegopteris connectilis
Common Name: Northern Beech Fern
Habitat: Moist woods
Spores can be found: 7/9 — 9/27
State Status: ST
Number of sites in State: 3
Counties found in: Providence, Kent
Notes from Don Lubin: Arrow-shaped fronds often horizontal. First cutting not complete except between first and second pinnae. Likes stream banks and waterfalls.

Photo credit for this page: ©Francis Underwood 2011
Botanical Name: \textit{Phegopteris hexagonoptera}

Common Name: Broad Beech Fern

Habitat: Moist woods

Spores can be found: 7/24 — 9/24

State Status: \textbf{R}

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in: Providence, Kent, Washington

Notes from Don Lubin:
Frond shape nearly equilateral triangle. First cutting not complete anywhere. Basal pinnae much more dissected than others.

Photo credit for this page: ©Francis Underwood 2011
**Botanical Name:** Polypodium appalachianum

**Common Name:** Appalachian Rock Polypody

**Habitat:** On rocks or thin soil over rocks

**Spores can be found:** 4/11 — 11/1

**State Status:** R

**Number of sites in State:** 1

**Counties found in:** Providence

**Notes from Don Lubin:** Broad triangular evergreen fronds with pointed pinnae.
Botanical Name:

*Polypodium appalachianum X virginianum (P. X incognitum)*

Common Name:

*Hybrid Polypody*

Habitat:

On rocks or thin soil over rocks

Spores can be found:

State Status: **R**
Number of sites in State: 1 (1941)
Counties found in: **Providence**

Notes from Don Lubin:

Like parents, perhaps larger, with aborted white spores (Oct. - Nov.)

Photo credit for this page: Don Lubin
Botanical Name: 
**Polypodium virginianum**

Common Name: 
*Common Rock Polypody*

Habitat:
On rocks or thin soil over rocks

Spores can be found:
4/11 — 11/1

State Status: **C**
Number of sites in State: —
Counties found in: **All**

Notes from Don Lubin:
Narrow bitapering fronds with rounded pinna tips. Thoreau’s “cheerful communities”.

Photo credits for this page: left: Don Lubin; right: ©Francis Underwood 2011
Botanical Name: *Polystichum acrostichoides*
Common Name: Christmas Fern
Habitat: Rich soil in woodlands and on rocky hillsides
Spores can be found: 7/2 — 9/2
State Status: C
Number of sites in State: —
Counties found in: All
Notes from Don Lubin: Dark evergreen fern, pinnae with upward “ears” along rachis, fertile pinnae towards tip are smaller.

Photo credits for this page: center top: kbarton; lower left: Don Lubin; lower right: ©Francis Underwood 2011
Botanical Name: *Pteridium aquilinum* ssp. *pseudocaudatum*

Common Name: Clute's Bracken Fern

Habitat: Dry woodlands and fields

Spores can be found: 7/7 — 9/25

State Status: Possibly in RI

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in: —

Notes from Don Lubin:
Botanical Name: Pteridium aquilinum v. latiusculum
Common Name: Eastern Bracken Fern
Habitat: Dry woodlands and fields
Spores can be found: 7/7 — 9/25
State Status: C
Number of sites in State: —
Counties found in: All
Botanical Name: 
**Thelypteris novoboracensis**

Common Name: 
*New York Fern*

Habitat: 
Open woodlands

Spores can be found: 
7/26 — 9/22

State Status: C

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in: All

Notes from Don Lubin: 
Bitapering, pinnae nearly to ground, becoming very tiny.
Botanical Name: *Thelypteris palustris*
Common Name: Marsh Fern
Habitat: Woodlands with moist soil, swamps and marshes
Spores can be found: 8/2 — 10/11
State Status: C
Number of sites in State: —
Counties found in: All
Notes from Don Lubin: Blade widest near base, long brown stipe. Veins forked in sterile fronds.
Botanical Name: *Thelypteris simulata*  
Common Name: Massachusetts Fern  
Habitat: Deciduous woodlands with moist soil  
Spores can be found: 8/3 — 9/27 (10/6)  
State Status: O  
Number of sites in State: —  
Counties found in: All  
Notes from Don Lubin: Frond shape intermediate between Marsh and New York ferns, with lower pinnae reduced somewhat. Lower pinnae narrow toward rachis.

Photo credit for this page: ©Francis Underwood 2011
Botanical Name: *Woodsia ilvensis*
Common Name: *Rusty Woodsia*
Habitat: Rocky slopes, cliffs and ledges
Spores can be found: (6/18) 7/8 — 10/4
State Status: SH
Number of sites in State: 0 (1977)
Counties found in: Providence
Notes from Don Lubin: Very scaly small fern

Photo credit for this page: USDA Forest Service; Steve Janke
Botanical Name: **Woodsia obtusa**

Common Name: **Blunt-lobed Woodsia**

Habitat: On rocks in woodlands in sun or shade

Spores can be found: 7/16 — 10/29

State Status: U

Number of sites in State: —

Counties found in: **Providence, Kent, Washington, Newport**

Notes from Don Lubin:

Stipes quite scaly.
Botanical Name: **Woodwardia areolata**  
Common Name: *Netted Chain Fern*  
Habitat: Swamps and wet woods  
Spores can be found: 7/28 — 10/14  
State Status: **U**  
Number of sites in State: —  
Counties found in: **All**  
Notes from Don Lubin: Like Sensitive fern, but pinnae edges finely toothed, not scalloped. Tall fertile fronds like sterile, but much narrowed.
Botanical Name: Woodwardia virginica
Common Name: Virginia Chain Fern
Habitat: Marshes and swamps in shade or sun
Spores can be found: 7/22 — 9/19
State Status: O
Number of sites in State: —
Counties found in: All
Notes from Don Lubin:
Fronds grow in distinct lines, not clusters. Stipe and rachis dark, blade twice-cut like Cinnamon fern, but pinnae narrow toward rachis.
Index to Common Names

Adder’s-tongue
   Northern .......................... 36
Beech Fern
   Broad .................................. 42
   Northern .......................... 41
Bladder Fern
   Southern .......................... 15
Bracken Fern
   Clute’s .......................... 47
   Eastern .......................... 48
Chain Fern
   Netted .......................... 54
   Virginia .......................... 55
Cinnamon Fern .......................... 37
Cliffbrake
   Purple .......................... 40
Climbing Fern
   Hartford .......................... 33
Fern
   Christmas .......................... 46
   Cinnamon .......................... 37
   Fragile .......................... 16
   Hartford Climbing .......................... 33
   Hay-scented .......................... 17
   Interrupted .......................... 38
   Lady .......................... 6
   Maidenhair .......................... 1
   Marsh .......................... 50
   Massachusetts .......................... 51
   New York .......................... 49
   Ostrich .......................... 34
   Rattlesnake .......................... 14
   Royal .......................... 39
   Sensitive .......................... 35
   Silvery Glade .......................... 18
   Walking .......................... 4
Fragile Fern .......................... 16
Glade Fern
   Silvery .......................... 18
Grape Fern
   Blunt-lobed .......................... 11
   Cut-leaf .......................... 7
   Leathery .......................... 10
Hay-scented Fern .......................... 17
Interrupted Fern .......................... 38
Lady Fern .......................... 6
Maidenhair Fern .......................... 1
Marsh Fern .......................... 50
Massachusetts Fern .......................... 51
Moonwort
   Daisyleaf .......................... 9
   Dwarf .......................... 12
   Narrow Triangle .......................... 8
New York Fern .......................... 49
Oak Fern
   Common .......................... 32
Ostrich Fern .......................... 34
Polypody
   Appalachian Rock .......................... 43
   Common Rock .......................... 45
   Hybrid .......................... 44
Rattlesnake Fern .......................... 14
Royal Fern .......................... 39
Sensitive Fern .......................... 35
Spleenwort
   Ebony .......................... 3
   Maidenhair .......................... 5
   Mountain .......................... 2
   Silvery .......................... 18
Walking Fern .......................... 4
Wood Fern
   Boot’s .......................... 27
   Burgess’ .......................... 28
   Clinton’s .......................... 20
   Crested .......................... 22
   Goldie’s .......................... 24
   Hybrid .......................... 30
   Intermediate .......................... 25
   Marginal .......................... 26
   Marsh .......................... 31
   Slosson’s .......................... 29
   Spinulose .......................... 19
Woodsia
   Blunt-lobed .......................... 53
   Rusty .......................... 52
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