



Tidying garden ferns

A frequently asked question at fern shows is ‘When should I cut the old fronds off my ferns?’ The answer depends on the type of fern, the nature of the garden in which it is growing and the preferences of the gardener. Here are some general guidelines:

1. Ferns do not benefit from having their fronds cut off in the way that pruning can encourage some flowering plants to flower a second time. In general, fronds should only be cut off when they have ceased to provide the plant with nutrition from photosynthesis. A frond that has lost this function may appear brown and dead, may remain green but lie flat on the ground and be very loose where it joins the plant, or may remain green and upright on a stem that has turned woody and brown and shows no healthy, green tissue inside when cut across.
2. In a formal garden, the inactive fronds may be pruned at any time to achieve the desired aesthetic effect. If the garden is a more ‘natural’ one, then it may look best to leave the inactive fronds on the plant until the spring. Leaving the fronds on has the advantage of making the plant visible throughout the winter months so that it is not trodden on or planted on top of. Dead fronds can then either be left until they rot off or be removed. Removing old fronds allows new croziers to emerge unhindered and achieve a better shape for the plant. It is best to do this before the new croziers begin to uncurl as they can be very brittle and snap off easily.
3. Some ferns, such as the Polypodies, will naturally shed their brown old fronds or these can easily be pulled off. This should be before new croziers emerge in mid- to late summer.