

## GARDEN FERNS WORTH GROWING

DONAL SYNNOTT

National Botanic Gardens,  
Glasnevin, Dublin 9, Ireland

The time may be right for an expansion of the pitifully small number of ferns in popular use. A search of the retail outlets for plants in the Dublin area, including garden centres, florists, and supermarkets, would produce the following short list:

### House plants:

*Adiantum capillus-veneris* (common maidenhair fern)  
*Nephrolepis exalta* (sword-fern and the cultivar known as Boston fern).  
*Asplenium nidus* (bird's-nest fern)  
*Pellaea rotundifolia* (button fern)  
*Cyrtomium falcatum* (Japanese holly-fern)  
Plus one or two unnamed exotics.

### Hardy ferns:

*Athyrium filix-femina* (lady-fern)  
*Dryopteris affinis* (scaly male-fern)—probably a cristate cultivar.  
*Polystichum setiferum* var. *acutilobum* (soft shield-fern).  
And occasionally *Matteuccia struthiopteris* (shuttlecock fern) and *Blechnum magellanicum* [syn. *B. tabulare*].

All of this is indicative of a poor state of affairs in regard to fern gardening in Ireland. Since it should be the responsibility of Botanic Gardens to provide headlines and ideas for improvement, the fern garden at Glasnevin has been reorganised and is in the process of expansion. The site, a steep bank facing north, is perhaps not the most suitable for ferns but it had one great advantage—it was available.

The collection includes native species and varieties and some exotics. Since the original plantings two years ago, the beds have been devastated by two happenings: all of the species and varieties of *Polystichum*, except *Polystichum braunii*, have succumbed to an unknown or untraced disorder and of the forty fern varieties planted originally, fourteen disappeared without trace within three weeks and three others have since joined their ranks, one as late as June, 1986! This is a hopeful sign. If there is someone around prepared to steal ferns, then they must be becoming desirable plants again and the group as a whole may be staging a comeback.

The remarkable interest in fern growing which existed in the Mid-Victorian era and which is known to historians as the Victorian Fern Craze, has been well documented, most recently and comprehensively by Allen (1). The popularity of ferns from about 1840 to

the end of the century was due to a number of factors, some of which can be identified or at least suggested: in Victorian society, colour and gaiety in outward expression were deliberately subdued so that green plants such as ferns, ivy, and aspidistra were suited to the modes of the times; the urbanisation of Britain following the Industrial Revolution separated people physically from the countryside, while the Romantic movement in poetry and art regarded nature and the countryside as the ideal surroundings for man; fern growing presented a challenge—the production of beautiful plants from tiny spores was a mystery and a delight; the invention of the closed glass case for transporting and keeping plants meant that ferns could be kept in hostile urban environments; any form of greenery which provided an alternative to the aspidistra must have been visually stimulating and welcomed with open arms.

All of this was good for business. Although the Fern Craze owed its origins and its excesses to the enthusiasm of amateur growers and collectors, it had spin-off effects for nurserymen, gardening supply shops, publishers, and writers of gardening books, and professional horticulturists and botanists.

In the early years it seems that emphasis was placed on foreign exotics, especially from Australia and New Zealand. A certain John Reilly of Papplewick, near Nottingham, had nearly 300 species in cultivation at the time of his death in 1846. For nearly a decade before that date the fashion for ferns had been gathering momentum. The number of ferns and fern spores were steadily increasing in the catalogues. The Wardian case had made its appearance. After a walk in the Welsh mountains, Edward Newman had suddenly succumbed to what he described as “that lasting and incurable disease, the Fern Fever”.

Like St. Paul, Newman came late to his vocation, but he came to it with a vigour and conviction that was to have a lasting and important influence on the fern trade. Newman became friends with Nathaniel Ward, who had developed the closed glass case for growing and transporting delicate plants, and between them they transformed what was a hobby into a craze. Like most devotees of fringe pursuits, Newman exaggerated the popularity of fern growing to an absurd extent. In 1840 he wrote, “The cultivation of ferns is becoming a fashionable pursuit, almost everyone possessing good taste has made, more or less successfully, an attempt to rear this tribe of plants”.

*A History of British Ferns* (4) was a most influential book and spread the fever from the growing group of fern gardeners to the steadily growing ranks of field botanists. Coupled with the gardening fever, there was now a parallel and often overlapping group of those who collected ferns for their botanical interest. This brought a greater precision to fern nomenclature and switched the focus of attention from imported to native plants.

A second phase of the fern craze, the search for varieties of native ferns led to the kinds of excesses which were to undermine the whole movement. Overcollecting of rare species from well known sites; raising, describing, and naming of every abnormality or monstrosity raised from spores of ferns collected in the wild, discredited the enthusiasts in the botanical world. After a high point in the 1860's the fern craze waned but left a legacy of good and bad garden plants. Finally World War I, which changed the world, dealt a final blow to the group of plants which belonged with Wordsworth and Romanticism, Tintern Abbey, and the Lakes of Killarney gentleness and a belief in the hierarchical order in nature and in the world of men. The fern group, which had once dominated the vegetation of the earth and had briefly reigned supreme in the garden were now relegated to a role of botanical and horticultural curiosity. We are fortunate that, by a combination of accident and devotion, many good plants have survived, from which the cultivation of ferns may again expand.

Just as the horticulturists and botanists had combined to promote the fern craze so they joined forces in bringing it to an end. The botanists proceeded to annihilate the rarer species in their known habitats. Of the Killarney fern at Torc Waterfall Newman says, "I have stood amid the roar of waters gazing on hundreds of the dark green fronds of this fern as they waved to and fro in the agitated air, and sparkled with myriads of sun-lit drops. . . . I am told that this scene is to be gazed on no more, that all its beauties have been ruthlessly destroyed". Newman was perhaps more concerned with conveying the dramatic essence than the literal truth but the Killarney fern is certainly gone from Torc Waterfall.

Over wide areas of the trade standards of taste completely collapsed (1). All kinds of abnormality or monstrosity, whether grown from spores or dug out of the wild, were named and sold for inflated prices to a gullible public. Most of these were fit only for the rubbish heap (3). Allen adds, "(the trade) . . . by acting irresponsibly, helped to break the fashion that had brought it adventitious profit . . . and the connoisseurs increasingly abandoned their hobby in disgust".

At the peak of the trade the specialist nurseries had large selections to offer: Robert Sim of Fooks Cray in Kent had 818 species and varieties in his catalogue; the 1861 catalogue of Stansfields offered over sixty varieties of hart's-tongue alone, priced from one shilling to a guinea for a few exclusives.

Fern enthusiasts in Ireland and Britain are catered for by the British Pteridological Society. The society issues a Journal, a Bulletin, and occasional special publications. The latest of the special publications is *A Guide to Hardy Ferns* by Richard Rush (6). In this, some 581 species of varying degrees of hardiness and attractiveness are listed. Many are only tolerably hardy in the milder areas

but still a considerable number would do well in the average garden. There is certainly a good basis in this list for experimentation and expansion. From the dozen or so species now readily available it should be possible to increase our garden fern population by dozens if not by hundreds of species.

Plants can be sold to the enthusiast if they have an interesting story or name or come from some exotic place; the supermarket plant must have visual appeal if it is to move off the shelf. No amount of storytelling will convince the casual shopper to have an otherwise boring plant taking up space.

Clues to what might be suitable subjects for mass production are to be found in the literature. J. W. Dyce describes *Woodwardia radicans* 'Plumosum McCormack' as "of outstanding beauty and refinement", a better starting point than *Woodwardia virginica* which "faded away when planted out in a seemingly suitable site in a new garden" (6). *Dryopteris wallichiana* "a handsome fern . . . hairy black croziers—charmingly sinister—are a bonus" would seem to be a better bet than *Grammitis billardieri* "difficult to keep going . . . in Australia" (6). *Paesia scaberula* "abundant throughout New Zealand, often growing in full sun on poor soils . . . could well be invasive . . . very attractive" is more likely to take on than *Cryptogramma crispa* "a fanatical lime hater" (5).

For the future it would be nice to see the better and more lasting varieties of native species popularised. Raising new varieties of native species must be accompanied by a ruthlessness not normally associated with the gentle profession of horticulture; much of it will be going over the same ground as the Victorians, who did a superb job of exploring the possibilities of the native species. Many of the best forms are still in cultivation. One way forward would be to promote these and to look for new foreign species which will stand up to the rigours of our climate or the uncertainty of the supermarket shelf.

Of the 12,000 species of ferns in the world, Richard Rush has listed some 581 which are hardy or semi-hardy in the British Isles. More will be found. John Reilly of Papplewick was able to grow nearly three hundred species one and a half centuries ago. What man has done man can do. If it were possible to produce good lively specimens of only a fraction of these then the average gardener might be persuaded to increase his fern holdings from one or two varieties by a few hundred percent, while still retaining some space for a pink oxalis outside or a mother-in-law's-tongue in the kitchen window.

#### LITERATURE CITED

1. Allen, D. E. (1969) *The Victorian Fern Craze*. London.
2. Dyce, J. W. (1963) Variation in *Polystichum* in the British Isles. *British Fern Gazette*, 9, 97–109.

3. Dyce, J. W. (1980) New Fern variety finds. *British Pteridological Soc. Bulletin*, 2, 78–79.
4. Newman, E. (1840) *A History of British Ferns and Allied Plants*. London.
5. Kaye, R. (1968) *Hardy Ferns*. London.
6. Rush, R. (1984) *A Guide to Hardy Ferns*. British Pteridological Soc. Special Publication.

## THE NEED FOR GRASSES AND BAMBOOS

JOHN JOE COSTIN

Costin's Nursery,  
Portgloriam, Kilcock,  
County Kildare, Republic of Ireland

The quintessential Japanese Garden was created by Buddhist monks. It resulted from their need to have an environment which aided rather than distracted them in their meditation. The garden they designed provided the ambience of timelessness with no evidence of seasonal change. These were composed of evergreens, rocks, and water. They are classically beautiful gardens. Since the early 1960s landscape design has been abysmally dull. The *raison d'être* of these designs is that they had to be managed with residual herbicides. Plant selection was limited to those resistant to simazine. We have now, as a monument to the abandonment of good design skills, the incongruous conifer and heather gardens suffocating in soils too sumptuous and rich for plants of such humble origin. Alternatively for amenity schemes we have pastures of *Potentilla*, carpets of *Cotoneaster*, and barriers of *Berberis*.

Designs such as these based exclusively on woody plants are stiff and unbending, lack movement, and do not have the lovely textural changes which can be effected through the use of a wider range of plants.

Grasses offer the perfect foil to the heavy rounded outline of shrubs and other plants. Grasses were seldom used in the great herbaceous borders. The accent was on flower colour, à la Gertrude Jekyll. Since the war the emphasis has been greater than ever on flowers, with breeding directed towards creating bigger and larger, and brighter and gaudier flowers—begonias and roses being just two examples.

Thankfully today there is increasing awareness of the value of plants versus just flamboyant flowers and so, as a result, grasses have come very much into their own. The more aesthetic landscape designers use them freely to add that different texture line and lightness to general planting schemes. There are many plants besides grasses that have a grassy effect, such as *Acorus*, *Crocasmia*,