

A Society for Fern Enthusiasts

The British Pteridological Society was founded in the Lake District in 1891 and soon became the focal point for fern enthusiasts throughout the British Isles. Today it continues to provide information about ferns, through its website and by publishing regular journals, leaflets and books, and organising formal talks, informal discussions and outdoor meetings. The Society aims to promote all aspects of pteridology by encouraging the appreciation, conservation, cultivation and scientific study of ferns, horsetails, clubmosses and quillworts through publications, meetings and the provision of grants.

The international membership includes those interested in gardening, natural history and botany, both amateur and professional. It is a friendly society run on a voluntary basis.

The Society is affiliated to the Royal Horticultural Society and Plant Heritage, and supports recording and conservation activities with other botanical societies.

www.britishfernsociety.org.uk

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British Wall Ferns Identifying Ferns On Walls



Identifying Wall Ferns

When walking in towns or the countryside, it is not unusual to see ferns growing on old walls. The walls may be constructed of stone or of brick and mortar. Generally, the ferns will be supported by mortar that is decades old, and that has softened and absorbed moisture. Walls that remain uncleaned and shaded are the best sites to look. Search in old churchyards, under railway arches and bridges, and on the north sides of old buildings. Some of our old stone castles can be particularly rich with ferns, such as Sea Spleenwort (*Asplenium marinum*). Walls that are damp from broken drains or guttering are also good places to look.

Many wall fern sites may dry out in the summer, because of this several ferns can lose their fronds and retract to a hard centre (rhizome) that will shoot again when the damp returns. Some ferns, such as Rustyback Fern (*Asplenium ceterach*) will curl up their fronds to conserve moisture, and then open again when they are rained on. Consequently, the best times of year to find and identify these ferns are the spring and the autumn. Ferns that grow at the bottom of walls, such as Hart's Tongue Fern (*Asplenium scolopendrium*) may often be green throughout the year.

In towns, we are now seeing some non-native ferns that have become naturalised in the UK by spores spreading from garden specimens. The Japanese Holly Fern (*Cyrtomium falcatum*) is an example of a non-native that is now being found growing in walls, particularly in urban areas.

Wall ferns should not be collected from the wild. Apart from depleting the number of plants, many wall ferns are difficult to grow in cultivation and will die. This leaflet aims to help you identify and enjoy seeing these interesting plants in their natural habitat.

Intermediate Polypody *Polypodium interjectum*

This is the commonest polypody that grows in towns. It has a creeping root (rhizome) and it tends to lose its fronds in spring and grow new ones in late summer.



Common Polypody *Polypodium vulgare*

This fern grows across the whole of the UK and is the only polypody to prefer acidic soil to limestone, often growing on the tops of gritstone or sandstone walls.



Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*

Bracken is a large, world-wide fern that will attempt to grow almost anywhere. In walls it is usually very stunted. The unfurling fronds are furry.



Cretan Brake *Pteris cretica*

The Cretan Brake is a houseplant, that can survive mild winters outside. This, and the similar *Pteris umbrosa*, is occasionally found on sheltered walls, in urban areas.



Lanceolate Spleenwort
Asplenium obovatum

It is in dry stone walls, without mortar, that this fern may be found, although it is not common. It is largely confined to coastal areas in Wales and the South-West.



Maidenhair Spleenwort
Asplenium trichomanes

This small fern with a black stalk and lime-green pinnae (leaflets) is a very attractive and fairly common find. Several plants may grow in close proximity to create a clump.



Wall Rue
Asplenium ruta-muraria

Wall Rue is 5–10 cm tall, dark green, curly, and not an obvious fern, though it may be abundant. The back of the frond can be covered in dense, dark-brown spores.



Parsley Fern
Cryptogramma crispa

This small, attractive fern only thrives in completely lime-free walls in areas of high rainfall. It occurs mainly in dry-stone walls in Wales, the North-West, and Scotland.



Hart's Tongue Fern
Asplenium scolopendrium

This is an unmistakable fern with long, shiny, strap-like fronds, often growing in damp open soil in woodland, as well as in walls.



Japanese Holly Fern
Cyrtomium falcatum

The Japanese Holly Fern is an 'escapee' that has spread by spores from garden plants. It is shiny and attractive and can grow to 50 cm in a damp wall.



Forked Spleenwort
Asplenium septentrionale

Forked spleenwort has narrow forked fronds about 10 cm long. It is rare and is found in a few areas of Wales, Cumbria and Scotland.



Fortune's Cyrtomium
Cyrtomium fortunei

Fortune's Cyrtomium is a garden escapee that has been spread by spores on the wind. It is pale green with a dull surface but attractive tear-shaped pinnae (leaflets).



Brittle Bladder Fern

Cystopteris fragilis

The Brittle Bladder Fern is common in the UK in areas north and west of the Pennines. It is a delicate fern that likes mortared walls.



Southern Maidenhair Fern

Adiantum capillus-veneris

The Maidenhair Fern is very beautiful but also frost-sensitive. It is mainly found on cliffs in warm coastal areas but occasionally on walls in protected places.



Common Male Fern

Dryopteris filix-mas

This fern usually grows in the ground, where it can be more than 1 m in height. In walls, it is seldom more than 30 cm in height and is often much less.



Black Spleenwort

Asplenium adiantum-nigrum

This fern is found in damp, rocky places and on walls. It has a triangular-shaped frond, divided two or three times, that is shiny and tough to feel. The stalk is brown-black.



Limestone Fern

Gymnocarpium robertianum

This fern usually grows in limestone areas and is rarely seen growing in walls, although it has been reported to do so.



Rustyback Fern

Asplenium ceterach

This small fern has dense rust-coloured hairs on the back of the frond to prevent drying out. It can curl up when dry and recover when it is rained on.



Southern Polypody

Polypodium cambricum

The Southern Polypody grows in limestone areas or on walls with lime mortar. Often this fern will grow on the top of a country wall, losing its fronds in a dry summer.



Sea Spleenwort

Asplenium marinum

Sea Spleenwort can be found in coastal areas in the north and west of the UK. It is bright green in shaded areas but can get burnt by the sun. It can resist salt-spray.

