
Sword Fern (*Polystichum munitum*)

Wood Fern Family

Why Choose It?

Sword Fern stays green through rain, snow, sleet, and dark of night. Also in sun, shade, wet soil, dry places, and drought. Ubiquitous and easy to overlook, Sword Fern is handsome, hardy, and practical.

In the Garden

With its tufts of pointed fronds growing to four feet or longer, Sword Fern is a natural in a woodland garden. As filler or background for the showy and colorful, Sword Fern excels. But it's also great for adding striking foliage to out-of-the-way places, like the dry shade under roof eaves.

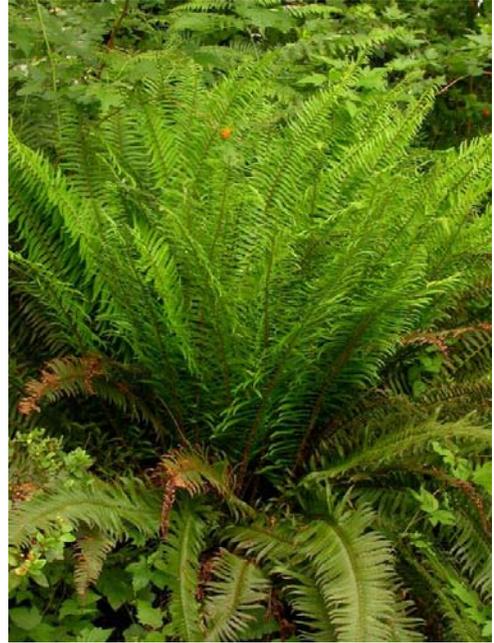


Photo by Ben Legler

The Facts

Leathery, dry, and dark green, Sword Fern's leaves are lined with saw-toothed leaflets. On the underside, see the dots of spore cases that turn from green to orange-brown and release their spores in late summer. Sword Fern is not a fussy plant, and it will transplant well to sun or shade, stream bank or fence line—especially when given soil rich in organic matter that mimics a forest floor. It's drought tolerant once established; give it a good start by watering during dry spells for the first two years.

Where to See It

Sword Fern is a dominant understory plant throughout the forests of western Washington—it's hard to miss from sea level to middle elevations in the mountains. Look for rollicking hummocks of fronds on your favorite walk in the woods.

And, hey, to prune or not to prune?

Opinions differ about whether to trim off last year's fronds in March. The ferns in the forest do just fine without this attention, but some gardeners find the old fronds tatty and objectionable. The old fronds may help a young plant grow bigger faster. But there's no harm in trimming them off a venerable warhorse of a Sword Fern, so long as you don't cut into its tender heart.



Photos: Ben Legler

You can find out more information about native plants, including where to buy them, from the Washington Native Plant Society.

www.wnps.org

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Native Plant Spotlights

Adapted from writing by Sarah Gage

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