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978-1-108-03718-1 - The Fern Garden: How to Make, Keep, and Enjoy it.

Shirley Hibberd


Excerpt

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THE FERN GARDEN:
HOW TO MAKE, KEEP, AND ENJOY IT;
OR,
FERN CULTURE MADE EASY.

CHAPTER I.

FERNS IN GENERAL.

 HAVE a fine opportunity now for a dry chapter. I have a good mind to hang up a tuft of straw to indicate that the way is dangerous, and to warn the reader not to proceed a line further. Ferns, my friends, belong to the sub-kingdom of vegetables termed CRYPTOGAMIA, a sub-kingdom so named because it is the custom of the population to celebrate marriages in the dark, so that it can scarcely be averred of them to a certainty that they really marry at all. In this sub-kingdom there are several large tribes, such as the mosses, the horse-tails, the lichens and liver worts; but the ferns or *filices* are the most noble of all, associating with others freely, but towering above them in apparent consciousness of right to rule.

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All the cryptogams are destitute of flowers; that is one of their most noticeable distinctions. But though flowerless they, for the most part, produce seeds in plenty. Look on the under side of a ripe frond of almost any fern you can get hold of, and you will observe sharp lines, or dots, or constellations of red, brown, or yellow fruit or spore cases; within these are the *spores* or true seeds, by the germination of which the race is multiplied.

Ferns differ from flowering plants in the principles of their construction and growth. If we examine the base of a leaf-stalk of a tree we shall find a bud there, which, if left alone, will produce a branch or a cluster of fruit the next season. There are no such buds in the axils of fern leaves, not even in those of the brake, which is peculiarly tree-like in its growth. The growth of a fern is a sort of perpetual lengthening out at both ends. The upward growth, which is more frequently the subject of observation than the growth of the roots, consists first in a process of unrolling, and then of expansion and maturation of the leaves and stems. Because of these and other characters which obviously and without reference to the peculiar nature of their fruit distinguish them from flowering plants, the several parts of a fern are named differently to the corresponding parts in flowering plants. Thus, the true stem or root-stock of a fern is called a *caudex*, the true leaf is called a *frond*, the stem which bears the leaf is called the *stipes*, and the ramifications of the stipes through the leafy portion corresponding to the leaf-stalks of other plants bears the name of

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rachis. These are all the technicalities we need be troubled with, save and except as we go on the names of the ferns themselves. From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step. I have just made that step while walking through the fern-house to obtain the needful inspiration to write this little book. There I saw my plummy emerald green pets glistening with health and beadings of warm dew, and I thought it might help me if I read their names. Here are a few of them—*Acrostichum Requienianum*, *Alsophila Junghuhniana*, *Anemia Schimperiana*, *Aspidium Karwinskyanum*, *Polystichum Plaschnichianum*, *Asplenium Gaudichandianum*, *Euphegopteris hexagonopterum*, *Dictyopteris megalocarpum*. You must endure this sort of thing if you purpose giving the slightest amount of attention to ferns, for only a few out of thousands have English names, and to translate the botanical names into English would be very imprudent, not to say sometimes impossible. But I assure you the names do not spoil the plants, they only compel fern books to be ugly and forbidding. Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs was an unamiable person, but my *Mohria thurifraga* var. *Achilliaefolia* is as sweet a bit of vegetable jewellery as you are likely to meet with in a day's march, and I am sure you will admire, when you find it, *Didymoglossum* vel *Trichomanes radicans*.



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CHAPTER II.



BELIEVE no one can thoroughly enjoy or understand ferns until after having actually hunted for them in hedgerows, woods, and amongst rocks, and rivulets, and waterfalls. The lady fern may be allowed to sing, as Madame Vestris did once upon a time :

Through the woods, through the woods,
Follow and find me,
Search every hollow, and dingle, and dell,
I leave but the print of my footstep behind me ;
So those who would find me must search for me well.

I cannot afford space to enlarge upon the joys of fern-collecting, the pic-nicing, archæologico-exploring, and holiday perambulating that may be associated with the sport. Kindly imagine all this and save me the expenditure of space on anything but the business in hand. Ferns are so widely distributed that wherever a rural walk is possible, it is almost certain that somewhere in the district ferns may be found. The south-western counties of England constitute the home-paradise of the fern collector, but, as we must find our happiness where our lot is cast, it is better to make the most of the ferns within our reach than to repine if Cornwall and Devon happen to be *terra incognita*. In the neighbourhood of London are many localities rich in ferns,

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but as these are for the most part pretty well known I shall not enumerate them, but proceed at once to make some remarks on collecting ferns for cultivation. It is only during the height of summer that the deciduous kinds can be readily found by inexperienced collectors, and it is at that season that fern hunting proves a particularly agreeable pastime. It would be better always if the ferns could be removed from their native sites when first about to commence their new growth in the spring, and this can be done sometimes by searching in woods and hedgerows for old fronds, and tracing them to their source. The roots should then be taken up without injury to the crowns, and be at once planted or potted as required, and assisted with shade and shelter until established in the places assigned them in the garden. Experienced collectors may hunt for ferns during the winter to great advantage in districts where they are known to abound, as in the event of a mild season many of the deciduous kinds will be still green; and evergreen kinds, such as hartstongue and common polypody, may be better lifted in winter than at any other season. But as a rule fern hunting is a recreation for summer time, and any fern may be taken up in the height of summer and be kept with the utmost certainty for cultivation; the worst that is likely to happen is the loss of all the fronds they carry at the time of taking up; but a new crop will soon succeed them if proper care be taken. The fern collector should be provided with aids and implements adapted to the county in which he is about to make explorations. Where only terrestrial and hedgerow

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kinds are expected to be found, a large basket, or better, a pair of baskets of moderate size, such as can be carried one in each hand, will be necessary. They should have close fitting lids, because if ferns are taken up on a hot day and exposed for some hours to the atmosphere, the crowns and roots will be so much exhausted that some may die, and all will be injured, whereas by packing them close with a little moist moss amongst them, the roots and crowns will be kept tolerably fresh until they can be potted or planted out. A short-handled three-pronged fork and a trowel, and a strong clasp knife, will be needful; and in some instances it will be necessary to borrow a spade or digging fork near the spot where operations are to take place, for fine old roots of royal osmund and other large-growing ferns will defy the leverage of all small hand tools. When ferns of large size are taken up in the height of summer, *it is best to cut away all or nearly all their fronds at once, and use those fronds as packing material.*

On reaching home, the best treatment to subject them to is to pot them all separately in the smallest pots their roots can be got into, with cocoa-nut fibre alone or the fibre of good peat or leaf-mould, and shut them up in a frame, and keep only moderately moist until they start into growth. As at this early stage of the study I may suppose you do not know how to pot them and restore their energies, I will endeavour to point out a simpler mode of procedure. Find a very shady place in the garden and there make a bed of leaf mould or peat soil, or cocoa-nut fibre refuse, and plant the ferns in it as close together as possible. Then cover them

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with bell glasses or common hand lights, and sprinkle them with water every evening, but take care not to make them very wet at the roots. They will soon begin to grow. In the spring following you may plant them in the fernery.

Small ferns found growing on rocks and walls must always be carefully dealt with. The little maidenhair spleenwort will sometimes send its black wiry roots quite through the substance of a nine-inch or fourteen-inch wall, and to remove it with complete roots is then quite out of the question. By loosening a portion of its hold just below the crown of the plant, roots may generally be obtained sufficient to enable it to re-establish itself under cultivation. A strong chisel and a hammer will be required in undertakings of this sort, and it may be well to add a little discretion also, especially as to extent to which walls—the property of somebody—are to be injured for the sake of a tuft of fern worth but a few pence, and of which specimens may be obtained more easily by further search without any necessity for the infliction of damage. Ferns found growing on and amongst rocks should always, if possible, be obtained with portions of the rock to which they are attached. If this cannot be accomplished, carefully tear the plant from the rock in a way to injure the roots as little as possible; good pieces will soon emit roots and fronds if properly treated, especially if kept moist by packing in moss or sphagnum from the first moment of obtaining the specimen. Allow me to remark, further, that the passion for fern collecting has in many instances been carried to a ridiculous excess

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by persons who merit the title not of fern collectors so much as fern destroyers. Let every genuine lover of ferns be on his guard both to discourage reckless fern collecting, and protect as far as possible the few remaining localities of scarce British ferns. It is not many years since I saw amongst a heap of dried mosses, ferns, grasses, &c., in the possession of a lady, a *sheet* of Tunbridge fern nearly a yard square. This had been torn from its native site, carefully rolled up like a piece of old blanket, and put away, and was afterwards brought forth as a trophy, and preserved as a memorial of the days "when we went gipsying." The value of that sheet when fresh might have been about £5, and no doubt any nurseryman could make a larger sum of a good square yard of the Tunbridge fern. Such reckless destruction, such base contempt for the value set upon a rare fern by those who understand its history and its habits, and appreciate the interest that arises out of its beauty and rarity combined, is to be considered as a crime; and though there is no law to punish the perpetrator, except in cases where there might be an action for trespass or wilful damage, it is the duty of every conservator of our native flora to visit crimes of this kind with the sternest disapprobation, accompanied with truthful explanations of the injury done alike to natural scenery and to science by such acts of spoliation.

If you can dig up ferns in early spring, you may plant them in your fernery at once, and if shaded for a time and frequently sprinkled with water, taking care always not to make the soil about them very wet,

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they will soon begin to grow vigorously, and after that patience is the only quality required on your part to ensure your proper reward.

You will soon learn to distinguish ferns from all other plants when you meet with them. When you find a fern, take notice of the soil and situation it is growing in, and in attempting its cultivation imitate those conditions as nearly as possible. The pretty wall rue spleenwort loves to grow in the full sun, upon and amongst sandstone rocks. You will see plenty of it on the approaches to the Suspension Bridge at Clifton, and you may find the common maiden-hair spleenwort keeping it company if you look sharp. It is in the shady, dank, almost dripping hollow, or on the slope of a water-course, that you are most likely to find the lovely lady fern, the hard fern, and the royal osmund, yet these will sometimes make a bonny show upon dry banks beside a dusty highway, where, perhaps, for miles the common lastrea is the prevailing fern of the district. In Epping Forest there are thousands of pollard trees on the awkward stems of which are perched, like wreaths of honour, tufts of the common polypody. I used when a boy to tear them off to line my basket with when birdnesting, for that forest was my playground. If you want to see the bracken you need not travel far, but if you would cultivate it you must notice that it grows to its grandest stature on mellow, yellowish loam, and is rather poor and stunted on sand and peat, though not always so. Observe always how they look when they are at home, and thereby learn to persuade them to believe themselves

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at home when you have planted them in the garden. Some thrive on perpendicular walls of stone and brick, others in the moist woodland shade, others on the bleak mountain top, and many a glorious group may be found on the sides and roofs of caverns, which they make like fairy palaces with their green feathery plumes and golden dottings of mysterious fruit. However many lessons you may learn of the habits of the several kinds of ferns, there should be one lesson impressed upon your mind more deeply than any—it is this, that, much as they love moisture, it is a most rare thing to see a fern growing with its roots naturally in water. When they congregate, as it were, to drink of the brook that passes by, they keep their feet clear away from the current, and lodge safely on the slopes that dip towards the water; or stand proudly upon little islets that compel the stream to sing as it passes them; or on banks and hummocks round about where they can enjoy the tiny splashes the trout make when they leap for flies, and the soft nourishing vapour that rises day and night amongst their shining fronds. Yes, it is upon slopes mostly that ferns love to grow; in places where water rarely lodges, but where moisture is abundant, and there is some shade against the noon-day summer sun. Note all you see of the whereabouts and ways of your favorites, and you will find that there is a better book on fern-growing than the one you are now reading—it is the BOOK OF NATURE.

