

## Cutting Back Ferns – The Art of Fern Maintenance

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When I am speaking about ferns, I am often asked about cutting back ferns. All too frequently, and with little thought, I give the quick and easy answer to cut them back in late winter or early spring, except for the ones that don't like that. This generally leads to the much more difficult question, "Which ones are those?" This exposes the difficulties of trying to apply one cultural practice to a complicated group of plants that link together a possible 12,000 species. There is no one size fits all rule of thumb.

First of all, cutting back your ferns is purely for aesthetics. Ferns have managed for millions of years without being cut back by someone. This means that for ferns you may not be familiar with, it is fine to not cut them back and wait to see how they react to your growing conditions and climate.

#### There are three factors to consider when cutting back ferns:

##### 1. Is your fern evergreen, semi-evergreen, winter-green or deciduous?

Deciduous ferns are relatively easy to decide whether to cut back – when they start to yellow and brown in the autumn, cut them to the ground. Some deciduous ferns have very thin fronds and finely divided foliage that may not even need to be cut back in the winter. A light layer of mulch may be enough to cover the old, withered fronds, and they can decay in place.

Semi-evergreen types are also relatively easy to manage. Often, semi-evergreen species will enter winter looking fine, but by mid-winter the fronds collapse or begin to deteriorate. Semi-evergreen species can all be cut back in mid-winter once the fronds begin to decline. Fronds should be removed close to the base to give a clean and neat appearance to the remaining crown.

There are only a small number of ferns that are winter-green. Winter-green ferns are deciduous ferns that are dormant during the summer and produce foliage in fall and winter. Most of winter-green ferns are *Polypodium* species. When the fronds begin the yellow and brown in late spring early summer they can be removed. Be careful not to accidentally cut these ferns back in late winter with the evergreen ferns.

Evergreen species are more complicated. While most evergreen ferns can be cut to the ground in late winter or early spring before the new fronds start to emerge, there are many exceptions to this rule. The remaining two factors for considering when to cut back ferns will help you decide when to cut back evergreen ferns.

##### 2. Vigor of the species or cultivar.

Evergreen fronds allow for photosynthesis to happen year-round. When evergreen fronds are removed, it eliminates the ability of the fern to produce carbohydrates and forces the fern to live off stored energy reserves. If we cut back fronds in late winter or early spring, the fern only needs to use these energy reserves for a short period of time before new fronds emerge, allowing for photosynthesis to begin again. The more robust growing an evergreen fern is, the more likely it can successfully tolerate having its fronds removed without loss of vigor. Slow-growing and dwarf species and cultivars generally do not recover well from being cut back and it is best to either carefully trim the old fronds off once new fronds emerge or remove old fronds only when they are fading and brown.

### 3. Region and climate in which you garden.

Fern performance can vary depending on where they are grown. Few of our hardy ferns grow the same across all temperate regions. Ferns that love the heat and humidity may grow much slower in cool-summer climates and the reverse maybe likewise. If your evergreen fern seems to be a slow grower, it is best to wait for the new fronds to emerge and, if the fern is particularly slow growing, mature before removing the old fronds.

#### Guidelines for Cutting Back Ferns

The following is a list of some of the cultivated ferns in North America. These cultural care suggestions will be biased slightly toward the modified Mediterranean climate of the maritime Pacific Northwest; but, if the three factors above are taken into consideration, this list is useful for anyone growing hardy ferns. This list will also be published on the Hardy Fern Foundation's website where additions will be made as more information is gathered.

<i>Adiantum</i> 'Golden Michael'	cut back in autumn
<i>Adiantum aleuticum</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Adiantum</i> × <i>mairisii</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Adiantum monochlamys</i>	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Adiantum pedatum</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Adiantum</i> × <i>tracyi</i>	cut back in early winter, groom in spring
<i>Adiantum venustum</i>	cut back in early winter
<i>Anisocampion cuspidatum</i>	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Arachniodes aristata</i>	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Arachniodes davalliaeformis</i>	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Arachniodes simplicior</i> 'Variegata'	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Arachniodes standishii</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Asplenium adiantum-nigrum</i>	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Asplenium ebenoides</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Asplenium pinnatifidum</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Asplenium platyneuron</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Asplenium resiliens</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Asplenium rhizophyllum</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Asplenium scolopendrium</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Asplenium trichomanes</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Asplenium ceterach</i> ( <i>Ceterach officinarum</i> )	remove faded fronds in spring
<i>Astrolepis sinuata</i> ( <i>Cheilanthes sinuata</i> )	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Athyrium</i> 'Branford Beauty'	cut back in autumn
<i>Athyrium</i> 'Ghost'	cut back in autumn
<i>Athyrium</i> 'Godzilla'	cut back in autumn
<i>Athyrium</i> 'Ocean's Fury'	cut back in autumn
<i>Athyrium filix-femina</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Athyrium niponicum</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Athyrium otophorum</i>	cut back in autumn to early winter

<i>Athyrium vidalii</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Blechnum appendiculatum</i>	cut back in late winter before new growth
<i>Blechnum australe</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Blechnum hastata</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Blechnum niponicum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Blechnum penna-marina</i> ( <i>Austroblechnum penna-marina</i> )	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Blechnum discolor</i> ( <i>Lomaria discolor</i> )	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Blechnum nudum</i> ( <i>Lomaria nudum</i> )	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Blechnum nova-zelandiae</i> ( <i>Parablechnum nova-zelandiae</i> )	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Blechnum wattsii</i> hort. ( <i>Parablechnum montanum</i> )	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Blechnum spicant</i> ( <i>Struthiopteris spicant</i> )	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Blechnum chilense</i> ( <i>Parablechnum cordatum</i> )	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Bommeria hispida</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Cheilanthes argentea</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Cheilanthes eckloniana</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Coniogramme emeiensis</i> 'Golden Zebra'	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Coniogramme intermedia</i>	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Coniogramme japonica</i>	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Cryptogramma acrostichoides</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Cyathea australis</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Cyrtomium caryotideum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Cyrtomium falcatum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Cyrtomium fortunei</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Cyrtomium lonchitoides</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Cyrtomium macrophyllum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Cystopteris bulbifera</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Cystopteris fragilis</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Davallia mariesii</i> 'Korea Rocks'	cut back in autumn
<i>Dennstaedtia punctilobula</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Deparia acrostichoides</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Deparia japonica</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Deparia lobatocrenata</i>	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Deparia subsinuata</i>	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Dicksonia antarctica</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Doodia media</i> ( <i>Blechnum medium</i> )	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Dryopteris affinis</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris affinis</i> 'Crispa Gracilis'	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris x australis</i>	cut back in autumn to mid-winter when fronds collapse
<i>Dryopteris bissetiana</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Dryopteris blanfordii</i>	cut back in autumn

<i>Dryopteris cambrensis</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris campyloptera</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Dryopteris carthusiana</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Dryopteris celsa</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Dryopteris championii</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris complexa</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris crassirhizoma</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Dryopteris crispifolia</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris cristata</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Dryopteris cycadina</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris cystolepidota</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris dickinsii</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris dilatata</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris erythrosora</i>	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Dryopteris expansa</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris filix-mas</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Dryopteris formosana</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris goldiana</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Dryopteris hondoensis</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Dryopteris intermedia</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris koidzumiana</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Dryopteris labordei</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Dryopteris lepidopoda</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris ludoviciana</i>	cut back in mid to late winter when fronds collapse
<i>Dryopteris marginalis</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris namegatae</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris pulcherrima</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris purpurella</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Dryopteris pycnopteroides</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris remota</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris scottii</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris sieboldii</i>	wait until new growth emerges then cut old faded fronds
<i>Dryopteris stewartii</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris sublacera</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris tokyoensis</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Dryopteris uniformis</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris wallichiana</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Dryopteris yigongensis</i> hort.	cut back in late winter
<i>Gymnocarpium disjunctum</i>	cut back in late summer to early autumn
<i>Gymnocarpium dryopteris</i>	cut back in late summer to early autumn
<i>Homalosorus pycnocarpos</i> ( <i>Diplazium pycnocarpon</i> )	cut back in autumn
<i>Lemmaphyllum microphyllum</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Lepisorus bicolor</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Lygodium japonica</i>	cut back in late winter
<i>Macrothelypteris torresiana</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Matteuccia orientalis</i> ( <i>Pentarhizidium orientale</i> )	cut back in autumn

<i>Matteuccia struthiopteris</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Microlepia strigosa</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Myriopteris lanosa</i> ( <i>Cheilanthes lanosa</i> )	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Myriopteris lindheimeri</i> ( <i>Cheilanthes lindheimeri</i> )	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Myriopteris tomentosa</i> ( <i>Cheilanthes tomentosa</i> )	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Myriopteris wootonii</i> ( <i>Cheilanthes wootonii</i> )	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Myriopteris wrightii</i> ( <i>Cheilanthes wrightii</i> )	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Myriopteris rufa</i> ( <i>Cheilanthes eatonii</i> )	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Onoclea sensibilis</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Onychium japonicum</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Osmunda claytoniana</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Osmunda japonica</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Osmunda lancea</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Osmunda regalis</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Osmundastrum cinnamomeum</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Pellaea atropurpurea</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Pellaea glabella</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Pellaea ovata</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Pellaea viridis</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Phegopteris connectilis</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Phegopteris hexagonoptera</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Pleopeltis lepidopteris</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Pleopeltis guttatum</i> ( <i>Polypodium guttatum</i> )	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Polypodium appalachianum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polypodium × calirhiza</i>	cut back in late spring to early summer as fronds fade
<i>Polypodium cambricum</i> ( <i>Polypodium australe</i> )	cut back in late spring to early summer as fronds fade
<i>Polypodium glycyrrhiza</i>	cut back in late spring to early summer as fronds fade
<i>Polypodium interjectum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polypodium × mantoniae</i> ‘Cornubiense’	cut back in mid to late spring as new growth begins
<i>Polypodium scouleri</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Polypodium virginianum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polypodium vulgare</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum acrostichoides</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum aculeatum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum alticola</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum andersonii</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum andersonii × munitum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum braunii</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum × dycei</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum × Illyricum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth

<i>Polystichum makinoi</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum mayebarae</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum monticola</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum munitum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum neolobatum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum polyblepharum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum rigens</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum setiferum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum tripterum</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Polystichum tsus-simense</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum wilsonii</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Polystichum xiphophyllum</i>	cut back in late winter to early spring, before new growth
<i>Pteris cretica</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Pteris multifida</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring
<i>Pteris wallichiana</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Pyrrhosia davidii</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Pyrrhosia hastata</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Pyrrhosia lingua</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Pyrrhosia polydactyla</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Pyrrhosia sheareri</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Thelypteris noveboracensis</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Thelypteris palustris</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Thelypteris simulata</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Woodsia obtusa</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Woodsia polystichoides</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Woodsia subcordata</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Woodwardia areolata</i>	cut back in autumn
<i>Woodwardia fimbriata</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Woodwardia orientalis</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Woodwardia radicans</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Woodwardia unigemmata</i>	remove faded fronds as necessary in spring or summer
<i>Woodwardia virginica</i>	cut back in autumn