

By Don Lubin

Looking for ferns is primarily a summer sport. Most of them emerge in April or May and become prominent in May and June. They suffer some damage as the season progresses, from insects or deer or drought or mishaps. Some species continue to add new fronds throughout the growing season, but even if they maintain themselves, they may become lost among the jungly growth of late July and August. Then in the fall they fade, especially after the first hard frost, and turn brown and crumble along with falling leaves and most other plants.

But club-mosses and some ferns become easier to see as Autumn progresses. Like the gymnosperm trees – pines and hemlock and spruce – the following ferns keep their green through the winter.



*Dryopteris marginalis*

Newton does not have many of these though – you might have to look in the Blue Hills.

Sensitive and Ostrich ferns are dimorphic; they have fertile spore-bearing fronds that look quite different than the normal sterile ones. Their persistent fertile fronds remain erect through the winter, to scatter their spores in early spring. That makes them easy to spot in several inches of snow. Sensitive fern is rather common in wet areas with light.



*Spore-bearing Fronds*

Club-mosses are related to ferns, bearing little green needles for leaves and looking rather like baby evergreen trees. They persist through the winter, and even for several years after they have stopped growing.

Some of my most productive fern hunts have occurred in December, until the first heavy snow.



*Polypodium appalachianum*

Christmas fern got its name for being a green collectible at Yule, and if its rootstock is undisturbed in the icy ground, losing its dead fronds

does it little harm. Once the vascular channels have frozen they do not function again, and the old fronds benefit the plant only as mulch, keeping weeds at bay.

Polypody, the little fern communities atop shady cliffs and boulders, remain through winter and much of the following season, when new lighter green fronds stick up between the old in the spring.

Two of our Wood ferns, *Dryopteris marginalis* and *D. intermedia*, are quite evergreen, and *D. carthusiana* slowly yellows through early winter. Their common names are Marginal, Evergreen, and Spinulose Wood ferns. Wood ferns have the interesting habit of hybridizing amongst themselves, especially the less abundant Crested Wood fern. The best time to find these species and hybrids is after the background has turned brown and shriveled. Whether their spores and spore cases are normal or aborted is a clue to their identity.

Grape ferns, a branch of the genus *Botrychium*, are evergreen, or in the case of Cut-leaf Grape fern turn bronze in late fall and remain through the winter. They can seem to appear magically when the obscuring undergrowth fades.