

## ORGANIC HORTICULTURAL FLEECE

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For ten years we have kept an ever-growing population of *Dicksonia antarctica* in our Somerset garden, and each autumn we have tackled the traditional messy business of packing them in straw and wire netting to protect them against frost. Over the winter, straw escapes and scatters itself untidily, and there is further scruffy mess when the fern is unwrapped in the spring, the straw distributing itself around the garden in the inevitable breeze of unveiling day.

We have found a debris-free alternative. We discovered that one of our village friends keeps a flock of Balwen mountain sheep in North Wales. There is a good market for the breed's rather select meat, but their fleece is dark brown and unsaleable. We decided to purloin some of this material for experimental purposes.

Initially we filled net bags with small bits of fleece, but this was unsatisfactory as the fleece sank to the bottom of the bags after heavy rain. We achieved a much better result by wrapping whole fleeces around the trunks of the tree ferns and stuffing them into the crowns, then tying them on with baling twine, which embeds itself in the fleece to become almost invisible. It took two entire fleeces to completely cover a 2m tall fern. The tree ferns were delighted with this new form of protection, and survived several periods of severe frost. In spring, after all danger of frost had passed, we carefully unwrapped the fleeces and left them to dry out on netting, before packing them in plastic bags for use the following year.

Of course, any fleece would work just as well, but the Balwen is exactly the same colour as the natural trunk of the tree fern, and is probably the most aesthetic frost protection ever discovered. On the downside, the fleeces smell quite strongly of lamb chops, and at unwrapping time there was a ring of oily white lanolin around the base of the tree ferns, washed out of the fleece by the winter rains (but this caused no damage to the plants). Another disadvantage was that a colony of so-called solitary bees made their winter quarters in one of the fleeces, so that we had to leave it in situ for the summer, to the bemusement of our NGS visitors. Fortunately, these bees are not aggressive and no-one was stung.

Fleece can also be used to protect *Musa basjoo* stems so that they can continue growing from whence they left off the previous year, rather than dying back to ground level. We now have several 3m tall specimens, with a jungle of offsets sprouting up around them. I am even considering using fleece on my one precious *Ensete ventricosum* 'Maurelii' (Ethiopian black banana), which is rapidly outgrowing its pot.

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