



Fig. 1

Every spring, a patiently waiting army creeps out of the hedgerow and through the dry-stone walls into the edges of the field and the garden, and begins to settle in. It is pulled or dug up in the garden and cut down in the field, but we know it will try again next year. Bracken is a persistent, annoying pest.

In the young woodland below the garden, on steep ground, bracken still makes 2m (it regularly used to grow to over 3m); but frequent slashing and increasing shade from the trees are gradually wearing it down. Vigilance is needed though; the army is still there. Bracken is a determined adversary.

Actually, it's accepted that around the world there

are several brackens¹, of which two are said to occur in Britain, but whether or not they are species is unclear. Almost a million hectares of the British landscape are covered by what is usually just called *Pteridium aquilinum* – the plant that caused land-use expert Sir George Stapledon in the 1930s to lament: “Bracken, bracken, oh why all this bracken?”. I share the concern that there is so much, yet I would regret its total loss. I'm not anti-bracken, I just don't want it growing in my garden; there's more than enough outside! We've forgotten how useful a resource it was, and perhaps still is. It has long been regarded as a useful plant in several parts of the world.

Bracken in the garden

Martin Spray

I would list the uses of harvested bracken, from the gardener's perspective, as mulch, compost, temporary 'paving' and packing material; and one can add fuel, human and animal bedding, thatch; also soap-making, glass-making, and even food². Indeed, it was one of the few ferns eaten regularly by humans. 'Brown bread and butter is the best accompaniment' wrote one English food expert³.

This last use is controversial, as bracken is implicated in some stomach and other cancers. It has been linked with a number of animal deaths, and the spores are also considered carcinogenic⁴. So handling bracken, for compost making or anything else,

1. CN Page *A Natural History of Britain's Ferns*, Collins New Naturalist 1988

2. L Rymer *The history and ethnobotany of bracken*, Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society 73: pp 151–176, 1976

3. Dorothy Hartley *Food in England* Macdonald 1954

4. 'Composting bracken' page on www.carryoncomposting.com

quickly brings up health concerns. Spores are generally released in late summer, so this would be the season to avoid contact with the plant (RHS website: advice on bracken). Harvested bracken left on the ground until winter or early spring is generally considered safe; certainly though, caution is strongly advised.

In regard to bracken's less controversial uses listed above, I'm surprised it is not used more often in our gardens; some examples of how are given below.

The fronds, cut when dead and brown, and chopped into pieces, make a useful and inexpensive mulch: suppressing weeds, conserving water, and reducing winter leaching of soil nutrients. I have found it very handy for protecting any beds left empty over winter. It isn't brilliantly effective at suppressing things like buttercup and nettle, but does a fair job otherwise (fig. 2). It is easily lifted or removed, and easily put back or replaced, though it doesn't stay put as well as some other mulches. We have used it to mulch ornamental as well as productive beds. It works well for potatoes, even though it doesn't deter slugs very well (unsurprisingly). An effective and neater mulch is made from part-



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Fig. 2 Layers of mixed plant/bracken litter ensure few competitors establish.

rotted but fairly dry litter covered by more recently fallen fronds.

The horticultural world recently rediscovered that bracken fronds can be made into compost⁵. I am not fully convinced about this, nor have my own attempts at making it been impressive. One problem is that a year's delay is advised before use, owing to health concerns mentioned above. And it is unlikely to have quite the water-holding capacity of peat; though it could be a good (certainly abundant!) candidate as a peat substitute in compost⁶. It adds organic tissue to the soil, and that tissue is potash rich. I must admit that I don't know anyone who uses composted bracken

routinely. As the owner of our local garden centre rather laconically put it: "I don't stock it because customers don't ask for it". It can of course be burned, and the ash used as a fertiliser.

I have used the dried-out material, chopped by spade into shorter lengths, to 'pave' some of our paths, including some used almost daily as wheelbarrow routes, before they were made more permanent. They stood up to this use rather well, and wear-and-tear was simple to repair.

I can attest that dry dead bracken makes acceptable bedding – in our case it was acceptable to a donkey and its companion sheep. When soiled it was stacked to rot or spread on the soil.

5. *Ibid*

6. *Lakeland Gold compost*, www.dalefootcomposts.co.uk



Fig. 3 Last year's fronds make a natural blanket.

Dry, freshly dead fronds can make a very acceptable roofing thatch (fig. 3). Even my own unprofessional efforts support this. I built play dens, in the form of small, low benders – shelters made from a framework of bent branches traditionally covered with canvas or tarpaulin, except that mine had a cheat sheet of polythene held between

two layers of conifer branches. The upper layer held a thatch of bracken. The polythene kept the dens dry for sleeping in. 'In Invernesshire [...] the people thatched their houses with the stalks of this fern' wrote MC Cooke in his 1878 *Fern book for everybody*. Apparently, a competent thatcher could produce a roof that would

serve for at least fifteen years, and possibly twice that.

So much for bracken's possible uses as a harvested material. What of its characteristics as an ornamental garden plant?

Although it is commonly associated with woodland, most bracken grows in the open, on heath and moor. For so common and abundant a plant, it has several quirky habits. It usually grows on acidic soils, but I have been told it prefers an alkaline substrate on which to germinate. That is, when it actually makes spores; some stands and areas seem not to. Here at Hillside, I don't think ours has made spores for three decades. It just spreads insidiously, presumably by rhizomatous growth (fig. 4) – yet its main horticultural quirk is that it is notoriously difficult to establish from transplants.

In that context, the comment by David Jones in his *Encyclopaedia of Ferns* is interesting. 'It is so common and widespread and invasive that its horticultural qualities are often overlooked. And yet it is a rugged and appealing fern and blends in well with large, open landscapes.' This looks like quite a big challenge for intrepid gardeners; and so does the *RHS Dictionary's* quip that it has 'little garden value unless enormous areas of ground are available'.



Fig. 4 A ground-level view of the early 'jungle' of stems.

So, would you grow it? Anecdotal evidence suggests to me at least that it does have some supporters, who cite the invasive properties of bamboo or the toxicity of foxgloves in comparison. But despite some evidence of named varieties in the literature, and considering its abundance, bracken is a disappointingly uniform plant. The late-Victorian pteridologist EJ Lowe in *British Ferns, and Where Found*, the fern collector's equivalent to a stamp catalogue first published in 1890, characterises *Pteris aquilina* (as he calls it)

as 'growing up in single stems [...] like a tree [...]. No other fern is like it.', and with fern-hunter enthusiasm he notes that 'there are a few distinct varieties'. He lists but seventeen. In comparison, for the hart's tongue, a fern which varies rather a lot, he lists nearly 500 varieties – mostly his own discoveries.

I have rarely seen a non-standard bracken – and never any that seemed particularly garden-worthy, though I'm sure some of Lowe's would be worth trying. If that is, one might find them. With bracken

as with hart's tongue and other ferns, the great range of varieties that Victorian gardeners enthused over appears to have deserted the landscape, and few of their treasures are now available. The current on-line *RHS Plant Finder* lists only a bald *Pteridium aquilinum*, for which it has a single nursery – in France.

That would seem to sum up neatly the present garden status of a fascinating, misunderstood, overabundant – and not unattractive – plant which decorates the landscape only too well without our help. 🌿



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Fig. 5 Bracken dominates in open heathland

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