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The learning curve

Val Bourne

Fig. 1 *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Aurora' highlighted by ferns

I'm not blowing my own trumpet, honestly I'm not, but I do know the names of lots of garden plants; not surprising really for I have spent a lifetime acquiring plants from nurseries and open gardens, and then growing them – or trying to. I constantly tell my two lovely daughters that I'd be a wealthy woman if it wasn't for plants. And they were dragged along to enough nurseries and gardens in their childhood to vouch for the fact, and they nod knowingly in agreement.

One of my more recently developed plant passions is the hardy fern, particularly those with wintergreen foliage (fig. 1). They're restful on the eye, and their reassuring presence reminds me, when all else is in retreat, that the garden will return again in the spring like a hibernating animal. I buy them regularly. I plant them regularly. But I don't add

the labels, for my garden is already peppered with too many snowdrop labels. These are white and large, rather like tombstones some might say. I assumed the fern names would stick like the other plant names do, but these are as slippery as Teflon. They slide down the memory bank and disappear into the black void.

So I now have a collection of fifty or so ferns (and still growing). I love them dearly, despite the fact that I can't name many of them accurately, even though I mostly grow only five distinct species: dryopteris, polypodium, polystichum (fig. 2), adiantum and asplenium. This is extremely frustrating, rather like going to the wrong car in a car park and finding that your key won't open it. But it's even more maddening than that, because men who admire ferns seem to be able

to trip the names off their tongues with relative ease.

Men, it appears, have the upper hand when it comes to naming ferns and dammit, scientists have proven why. Apparently there's a link between testosterone and spatial awareness. Worse still ladies,



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Fig. 2 *Polystichum* fronds with erythroniums

a German scientific study found that ‘spatial intelligence’ was seriously affected by the female hormone oestrogen. Twelve female volunteers, aged between twenty and thirty, were put through a six-week series of exercises to test their awareness of objects around them. During menstruation the hormones fluctuate; oestrogen levels fall and testosterone rises; and the scores of all but one of the women shot up along with the testosterone. Presumably fern-naming would improve for those few testosterone-charged days too, along with getting the right lid on the right saucepan.

I must also confess that, like many women, I can’t read maps very well either. Once, when I was visiting Michael Heseltine’s garden, he loomed up behind me and took the map from me,

turned it the right way up and gave it back, before striding off like Tarzan into the jungle. He never said so much as a word, but I’m sure his black labrador smirked. I giggled loudly, as women will. Needless to say I haven’t attempted to map my ferns. There lies madness.

Although not a botanist (and it shows), I have managed to understand the recurring descriptive additions to fern names such as *cristatum* (crested, as in fig. 3); *crispum* (frilly-edged); *crenatum* (scallop-shaped); *frizelliae* (very crinkled like the lettuce); *fimbriatum* (with a small fringe); *congestum* (crowded, rather like the M25 on a Friday afternoon); *grandiceps* (large-headed); and *sagittatum* (arrow-shaped). I’m not so sure of the difference

between ‘*Grandiceps*’ and ‘*Grandiceps Askew*’ though; the latter is described by the fern king Martin Rickard as neat, but rare. It can only be a couple of glasses of wine between upright and askew; but that’s where I may be going wrong, for I’m teetotal.

Some names reflect the collector, such as *Martindale* (Lake District, 1872), *Bevis* (Devon, 1876), or *Druer*, circa 1900. These date from the Victorian episode of fern fever, or pteridomania, when enthusiasts roamed the damper western half of Britain, where ferns tend to flourish, in search of the unusual and rare. It goes without saying that *Martindale*, *Bevis* and *Druer* were men: although bonnet-wearing ladies with baskets apparently denuded Greater London of ferns for their conservatories and terrariums.

There are of course female fern fanatics, such as Angela Tandy of Fibrex Nurseries (www.fibrex.co.uk). She can name anything in the blink of an eye, although she is NOT suffering from a surfeit of testosterone I hasten to add. She’s been working with ferns for forty years on the family’s Warwickshire nursery and she told me that “you get to recognise them. They’re like children and they’re all different.” Her advice is to look carefully and say the name out loud every time you see your new treasure.



Fig. 3 *Dryopteris filix-mas* ‘Cristata’

Keep doing it until you know it by sight. Once you've learnt the name, look closely and learn to recognise the differences. Start with the foliage, then look at the colour of the stems and how they grow, examining the detail rather as you do with snowdrops. This advice has come rather late for me as I no longer have any of the labels.

Angela acknowledges that there are definitely more men who fancy ferns than women. They can be rather 'nerd-like', to use her words, but you have to be a nerd to undertake the ten-year process of raising ferns from spores. "Women just want to grow beautiful ferns that look lovely" she added and I'm with her there. Her ultimate favourite is *Polystichum setiferum* 'Pulcherrimum Bevis'. "The architectural fronds appear in April, it's evergreen and it's no bother because you can grow it in a border in dappled shade, though not deep shade. It's the perfect fern". And it's rather like a feathery shuttlecock. *Polystichum* means many-bristled so this is a trait that will get you into the naming ball-park. My *P. s.* 'Bevis' came via Sibylle Kreutzberger who used to be one of the Head Gardeners at Sissinghurst in Kent, with her partner the late Pamela Schwerdt. On good soil

P. s. 'Bevis' will become large and luxuriant and you can divide a mature crown, should you wish to, between April and August. Mine took several years to really shine, and I find ferns are best planted small and left to develop. Most are divided in the growing season. The exception is the summer-dormant polypody which needs to be tackled in August or September when it starts into growth once again.

I recently saw a splendid example of a black-stemmed fern, *Dryopteris wallichiana*, in a Suffolk garden; and that one also came from Sissinghurst. It is widely distributed but it's the Himalayan form, collected by Nathaniel Wallich (1786-1854), that's dark and handsome. This is one fern you should see before you buy. It loves summer moisture, and my large clump failed to produce fronds a couple of springs ago, following a dry summer and winter. I laid it on its side and – lo and behold – it produced new fronds in August from one part; so it clings on.

I like the solid fronds of hart's tongue fern, *Asplenium scolopendrium* (fig. 4), and these need deep shade because they scorch in sun. The exception is a golden form called *A. s.* (Crispum group) 'Golden Queen'. It needs a brighter position in order to develop golden foliage. Mine's in

shade and looks just as green as the others.

The *A. s.* Crispum group are small upright ferns that must have moist shade and shelter from midday sun. They have wavy edges that look as though they've been gathered up round the edges, or 'goffered' as Martin Rickard calls it; rather like wavy hair that's been crimped with tongs. The best fronds belong to *A. s.* (Crispum group) 'Crispum Bolton's Nobile' (fig. 5) and, when this fern has settled in, each frond will measure 10cm across. Mine is doing it; I've had the tape measure out to prove it!

The one I have the most trouble with is the lady fern, *Athyrium filix-femina*, because the fronds shrivel up when it becomes too dry.



Fig. 4 *Asplenium scolopendrium*



Fig. 5 *A. s.* (Crispum group) 'Crispum Bolton's Nobile' (left) with *Polystichum setiferum* 'Pulcherrimum Bevis' (right)



Fig. 6 *Polystichum setiferum* 'Ray Smith', now *P. s.* 'Smith's Cruciate'

Last summer proved fatal for some of mine. It dies back in winter, although many of my ferns look at their best in the dark months of winter. The polypodies look shabby in summer and this year I cut mine back in August, something that's not recommended. I'm also growing *Polypodium cambricum* 'Richard Kayse', the more feathery *P. c.* (Pulcherrimum Group) 'Pulcherrimum Addison' and *P. c.* 'Conwy', though I'd need a man to sort them out from each other with any certainty.

Angela Tandy also rates *Polypodium x mantoniae* 'Cornubiense', a fern for dryish shade when established. "Once it's happy it will produce three types of frond: plain, crested and heavily lacy." This is a good ground cover fern because polypodies are wider than they are tall. She added "It meanders and saunters along, without being an aggressive spreader." Like all polypodies it should be divided in August and September, when it starts back into growth after a summer holiday.

I think half the problem is that I tend to take my

glasses off when I garden, so I can't see any intricate details. However, I did attend Fibrex's fern day (held at the end of June), and I did manage to name *Polystichum setiferum* 'Ray Smith' (fig. 6) because of its narrow fronds and shuttlecock middle. Angela wasn't very impressed though as the botanists have renamed it, but the new name escapes me!

It seems when it comes to ferns, it's an advantage to be a man. Although as one fern man told me, it's better to grow them well than to know all their names! 🌿

Val Bourne is an award-winning garden writer, hands-on gardener and committed plantaholic. She manages her third-of-an-acre garden without using chemicals – something she has always believed in.