
Wildflower Spot – December 2008
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

CHRISTMAS FERN

Polystichum acrostichoides

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

One of the very few ferns which retain their green leaves all winter, Christmas fern is easily recognized by its dagger-like leathery leaves (fronds), which are often used in floral arrangements. Children like to be reminded that the individual leaflets (pinnae) have the shape of Santa's boot, and they are sometimes told that is the reason for the common name. Actually, it was the New England settlers' use of this fern for Christmas decorations that resulted in this common name.

Christmas fern grows in circular, arching clumps from a central rootstock, preferring partial shade in moist, acidic, well-drained soil. However, this plant grows well in most conditions with little maintenance and tolerates drought, heat, and poor soil. It serves as a good

border plant, or as a backdrop for smaller plants in a shade garden.

As with all ferns, Christmas fern reproduces by alternation of generations. The spores are seen on the undersurface of smaller pinnae toward the end of the frond. The spores germinate to form tiny sexually-reproducing leafless plant bodies, almost invisible on the moist forest floor. New growth develops when male and female portions unite to produce the familiar bouquet of shiny evergreen fronds. For more information about native plants visit www.claytonvnps.org. American Indians made a root tea for chills, fevers, stomachaches and pneumonia. ❖



Photo: Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.