

GROWING TROPICAL FERNS INSIDE CHICAGO'S DRY APARTMENTS AND HOUSES

LIGHT: Most tropical ferns come from shady forest or jungle floors and are easily burned by direct sun. They grow well in bright north windows or in bright indirect light away from the sun in south, east, and west windows. Tropical ferns also do very well under lights; you can create a fern garden under shop lights from Ace Hardware in a dark corner of a room.

HUMIDITY; To successfully grow ferns inside Chicago conditions, you must raise the humidity around your ferns, especially in winter when the radiators come on. Create a humid microclimate around your indoor ferns by growing them on pebble trays or humidity trays. Humidity can also be raised by grouping plants together on the trays and adding containers of water on top of the trays so that water evaporates and creates a humid microclimate. If you use pebble trays, be sure the level of water remains below the bottom of the pots of the ferns, and at least once a month remove the tray and rinse it out. Rinse out the pebbles in a kitchen strainer before reassembling the tray for your plants.

WATER: Do not let ferns dry out but do not let them sit in water either as this can lead to root rot. To avoid this, the best way to water your ferns is to remove them from their trays and place the pots in a sink, bathtub or drain board. Water your ferns with lukewarm water (cold water can shock your ferns) until you see water running out the bottom of the pot. Let your ferns drain and then replace them on their trays.

TEMPERATURES: Most tropical ferns prefer cool humid room temperatures. The most dangerous time for your ferns is in the fall, when the heat comes on. Make sure to remove your ferns away from any heat sources, and watch the humidity levels; if the leaf tips on your ferns begin to turn brown, this may mean that you need to raise the humidity in the microclimate around your ferns for the winter. Depending on where they are placed, ferns may need less or more water in the winter. Test the top of the soil in their pots and give them a thorough watering when they are dry. They may especially appreciate a misting a couple of times a day when you are passing by, if you leave a spray bottle near their pots. However, misting cannot take the place of the regular humidity provided by pebble or humidity trays.

FOOD: Your fern is potted in a potting soil that contains tiny pellets of slow release fertilizer, and so is not in urgent need of fertilizer, in spite of what plant food containers say. Overfeeding is as bad for plants as for people. Do not feed your fern in winter as it is enjoying a semi rest period. If you wish to feed your plant, choose a liquid plant food for houseplants (not cacti or African violets), mix it with lukewarm water according to directions, and water your fern thoroughly until water drains from the pot, once or twice during spring and summer when your fern is in full growth.