

## Niagara College Greenhouse & Nursery Success Sheet No. 71

### Japanese Painted Fern

#### Appearance

The Japanese painted fern (*Athyrium niponicum* 'Pictum') is native to China, Korea, Japan and Taiwan but has become very popular in North America due to its incredible beauty and versatility. Its name comes from the fronds, which look as if they have been carefully painted in shades of green, grey, and burgundy.

This variety, 'Pictum,' has blood-red stems that spill into the 12- to 18-inch, silvery-green fronds, which unfurl to reveal a stunning metallic grey. These colours are usually more intense in cooler temperatures.

The fern grows 18 inches tall and can eventually form a clump more than 2 feet wide. This lovely plant is outstanding for adding colour and texture to landscape beds and shade gardens.

#### Cultivation

This fern flourishes most in a well-drained, compost-rich soil and in moist, humid conditions. For a healthier and more attractive ornamental fern, plant it in partial to full shade. Adding 2 to 3 inches of peat moss or compost to the beds each spring or fall will enrich it further.

If it is in the proper environmental conditions, the Japanese painted fern will reliably show off its vibrant colours from early spring until frost, when it goes dormant for the winter.

#### Propagation

This beautiful fern is also popular due to the ease of propagation. Two methods of

propagating the Japanese painted fern are most common: dividing clumps and planting spores.

If you use clump division in or fall, producing amazing selections of this plant is easy. This method is most popular because you need to buy only a few plants and divide the clumps yearly as needed. If the plant is healthy and well grown, three or four divisions can be made and replanted. (These new divisions should be fertilized with an organic or time-release fertilizer at half the rate of other perennials.)

The second method of reproducing the fern is planting the spores. This usually works, but it is not as reliable as clump division. The growth habit and colour uniformity are not guaranteed when using this method.

#### Landscape

The Japanese painted fern can be used in most of southern Ontario and the United States because of its compatibility with cooler temperatures. Planting farther north will not produce plants of the same quality.

If in the right conditions, it beautifully adds texture, colour and contrast to other shade-loving perennials. You will find this plant often used in combination with hosta and bleeding heart. White flowers around these groupings will emphasize the beautiful colours. Almost any plant can be a great partner to *Athyrium niponicum* 'Pictum.'

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