

Ferns, and the White Oak Tree

by Sally Cureton

Frequently finding a plant that will thrive in a mountain habitat and yet not become a deer snack can be quite daunting. One excellent choice for Massanutten residents is the fern, particularly the Christmas fern (*polystichum acrostichoides*.) This is an evergreen plant, with fronds 1 to 2 feet long that is easily grown in diverse habitats. It gets its name from early settlers who used it for Christmas decoration.

In the spring the silvery-scaled coiled developing leaf of this plant contrasts nicely with the dark green of the old fronds. In the garden it can be dug up and branches can be separated and replanted to create new plants. Although the Christmas fern generally likes moist woodland, it also does very well in among rocks or on dryish slopes. In fact, it is excellent for preventing erosion on such slopes. It is native to this area and certainly many of us have it on our properties already. There is a nice display of it in the Rockingham Spring Arboretum along the pathways near the spring house.

Another good fern choice for this area is the hay-scented wood fern (*dennstaedtia punctilobula*.) It grows freely along roadsides in Massanutten Village. When the fronds are crushed it gives off the scent of new-mown hay. These fronds reach about two feet in height and are a bright green color. Hay-scented fern does extremely well in rocky woodlands. This is strong-growing, sturdy plant with few problems. It will die off each fall, unlike the Christmas fern which will stay green year round.

One of the most common trees in our community is the White Oak, (*Quercus alba*.) This tree has been called “the king of kings” in the tree world. It has strong wood that provides supplies to industries ranging from ship building to barrel making and casket construction. It is also used for furniture and firewood. And, as we all know here, it is an excellent shade tree. The leaves are long with rounded lobes. The White Oak’s bark is light gray and divides into long narrow plates. It can be 80 feet tall or more at maturity. The acorns are up to an inch long. Wildlife depend on them - at least 28 species of birds feed on them as well as deer and other mammals. If you look around, you are sure to have several of these wonderful trees in your yard.