

NATIONAL PLANT COLLECTION®

Polystichum

Greencombe Garden Trust

Porlock, Somerset TA4 8NU

7 species, 48 cultivars, 61 taxa

INTRODUCTION

Polystichum setiferum is the largest producer of cultivars with hundreds of forms being once recorded, from tall upright forms 90-120cm tall to flat spreading cultivars. There's a vast range from elegant forms like 'Pulcherrimum Bevis' found in 1876 with its elegant plaited ends to the fronds to stunning golden multilobums and lacey gracillimums and divisilobum and dwarf forms ideal for scree gardens or sinks.



Polystichum setiferum
'Pulcherrimum Drueryi'

HABIT & CULTIVATION

The two main species that produce cultivars are *P. setiferum* and *aculeatum*. *Polystichum aculeatum* (hard shield fern) hold well all winter being fully evergreen and begin to look tired in spring, when the fronds should be removed in March to make way for the new fronds and also allow for a show of early spring bulbs. *P. aculeatum* is surprisingly drought tolerant and will take some sun but grows larger in shade. It very slow to produce side crowns. Only a handful of cultivars exist.

Polystichum setiferum is a complex mix of varieties. The softer to touch varieties need more water than those that have the harder feel of *Polystichum aculeatum*. They prefer neutral to alkaline soils, damp but not wet, but will tolerate slightly acid soil. *Polystichum lonchitis* and *P. aculeatum* are often found high up on limestone pavements but *P. aculeatum* can be found at lower levels.

PROPAGATION

- 1) From spore: this takes time but you get lots of plants. They will not necessarily be true to type but for *P.aculeatum* varieties it is the only way to get quantity quickly.
- 2) Division: removal of side crowns and replanting. Best done between March and October in the south of the UK when the ground has warmed. April to September further north.
- 3) Layering bulbils: some varieties produce little bulbils along the frond which can be pinned down when seen and left to root if some compost is lightly brushed into them and water in. Be aware that some varieties do not produce bulbils every year and some may only produce a couple at the base of the frond. Pot up or transplant in spring. These are usually identical to the parent but not always.

FEEDING

Very little required if the soil is well prepared beforehand. A good mulch of compost in spring is all that they need. Or a light scattering of general fertiliser especially under trees were the trees take out all the goodness.

In pots a liquid feed of tomato food at half strength once a month from when growth starts until the end of August, then let the plants harden up for winter.

PESTS & DISEASES

Generally trouble free but like any plant it can get vine weevil also fern weevil. Treat as for vine weevil with a pesticide or nematodes for vine weevil.

USES

Polystichum are evergreen and can make statuesque foils to winter flowering perennials, the flatter and dwarf forms ideal for the front of winter flower beds, on scree gardens. The foliage has so many different textures from simple fronds to crested as well as very feathery. Colours range from yellow green to dark shiny green. There is a vast variation ideal for contrast with other garden plants and giving a calming feel.