Common Ferns of Southwest Nova Scotia
Identification and Information

For use with Forest Ecosystem Classification manual and wetland delineation

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Key Start - Is it once-, twice-, or thrice-cut?

Once-cut
One single stem part
See page 3

Twice-cut
Splitting stem and simple leaves
See page 4

Thrice-cut
Splitting stem and complex leaves
See page 5
Are the leaves quite wavy and almost twice-cut at times?

Yes

No

Are the leaves boot-shaped and is the fern growing in a whorled cluster?

No

Yes

Sensitive fern FACW
Habitat: Wet, moderate richness, often in richer forested wetlands
Key Features: Wavy lower leaves, leafy stem, small-medium size, quite wide

Christmas fern FACU
Habitat: Fresh/moist, moderate rich to rich woodlands
Key Features: Medium size, growing in a whorled cluster, boot-shaped leaves

Do the leaves have very pointy tips and very small teeth throughout?

No

Yes

Dwarf chain fern OBL
Habitat: Wet, poor sites, often along edge of wetland/shore
Key Features: Very pointy leaves, minute teeth, leafy stem, small size

Polypondy UPL
Habitat: Rock- or cliff-tops, often in a thin mat of lichens, mosses and humus
Key Features: Small size, round leaves, growing singly in bunches
Thrice-cut Key Start

Is the lower stem green with brown scaly flakes?

Yes

Are the leaves barely thrice-cut?

Yes

Does it taper down to small triangle-shaped branches near the base?

Yes

Crested wood fern FACW
Habitat: Wet, poor to medium rich lowlands
Key Features: Small triangle-shaped lower branches, leathery leaves, leaves tilted to face up, almost not thrice-cut, small-medium size

No

Lady fern FAC
Habitat: Moist, moderate rich woodlands
Key Features: Black or very dark brown scaly flakes on a reddish-green stem near the ground, long and elegantly pointing branches, medium size

Marginal wood fern FACU
Habitat: Fresh/moist, poor to medium rich shaded sites
Key Features: Almost not thrice-cut, elegant stiff-looking fern, long pointy branches throughout, small-medium size, often associated with rocky sites in the southwest

No

How are the basal leaves set up?

First downward-pointing leaf (one closest to stem) is shorter than the second.

No

Spreading wood fern FAC
Habitat: Moist, moderately rich seepy woodlands
Key Features: Two lower basal leaves closest to the stem are much longer, second and third basal leaves are closer than the first and second

Yes

Marginal wood fern FACU
Habitat: Fresh/moist, poor to medium rich shaded sites
Key Features: Almost not thrice-cut, elegant stiff-looking fern, long pointy branches throughout, small-medium size, often associated with rocky sites in the southwest

First downward-pointing leaf (one closest to stem) is longer than the rest. First and second leaves are closer than second and third.

Evergreen wood fern FAC
Habitat: Fresh/moist, poor to moderate-rich woodlands
Key Features: Two lower basal leaves closest to the stem are shorter, often growing in abundance

No

Spinulose wood fern FAC
Habitat: Moist, moderately rich seepy woodlands
Key Features: Two lower basal leaves closest to the stem are longer, first and second basal leaves are closer than the second and fourth

Yes

Spreading wood fern FAC
Habitat: Moist, moderately rich seepy woodlands
Key Features: Two lower basal leaves closest to the stem are much longer, second and third basal leaves are closer than the first and second

Is the stem quite hairy and getting much darker towards the ground?

No

Yes

Hay-scented fern FAC
Habitat: Fresh, moderate-rich sites
Key Features: Hairy stem that gets quite dark near the ground, strong hay smell, flimsy small-medium-large fern, growing singly often in bunches, fancy-looking leaves, often in rocky or open site

No

No

Yes