

REEMS CREEK NURSERY

Platycterium Staghorn Fern

A Garden Guide

Platycterium spp. are tropical ferns found in rainforests around the world. Dramatic and unusual, in the wild they don't grow in soil, but on trees instead. Botanically, the term for this is epiphyte. With proper care, these slow-growing ferns can live for over 90 years. Depending on type and care, they usually grow 2-3'T x 2-3'W, but can eventually reach 6'T x 6'W in exceptional conditions.



Biologically, Staghorns are unique. They have a root ball, shield fronds, and antler fronds. The shield (or sterile) fronds are round and flattish, usually covering the rootball. These fronds start green but fade to brown - this is normal and healthy, and the brown fronds need to be left on the plant to provide protection, stability, and nutrients to the roots as it decomposes. The plant will eventually grow new green ones. The antler (or fertile) fronds are long and leathery. They may develop brown reproductive spores that look like brown fuzzy dots on their undersides, which is natural and a good sign that your plant is happy. Staghorn ferns have small root systems. In order to mimic their more natural growing environment, some people mount them on a vertical structure, which also helps to increase airflow.

Water: Watering needs depend on time of year, light exposure, and humidity. Soaking the rootball for 10-20 minutes is a popular method. During the warm period of the year, try soaking/watering once to twice per week, and every 2-3 weeks in cooler weather. Start with this schedule, and adjust as necessary depending on your space. Keep an eye on the antler fronds: if they begin to brown or blacken at the base, this is a sign of overwatering. Reduce watering to once monthly until the plant shows signs of recovery. If the antler fronds begin to brown at the tips or wilt, this is a sign of under-watering or too-low humidity. Increase watering as needed. This is a humidity-loving plant, and therefore enjoys being misted.

Light: Bright to medium indirect light.

Fertilization: In spring and summer, feed using a balanced fertilizer such as a 1-1-1 or 2-2-2 once a month. Fertilization rates slow down as they age, and mature Staghorns can be fed twice a year. Some people enjoy tucking an old banana peel behind the shield frond on occasion, but keep in mind that this can attract pests.

Potting Mix: If in a pot, use an extremely well-draining potting soil, such as Fafard® potting soil with extra Perlite added. If secured to a board, use Peat or Sphagnum moss, Coconut coir, or a Fafard® potting soil with extra Perlite added.



Care Details: In the wild, Staghorn ferns cling to trees and have dead plant material dropping in behind the shield fronds. This material decomposes and becomes compost for the plant to grow in. To imitate this, many people mount their plants on wooden boards, and create a planting “pocket” made with a variety of materials, such as Wire mesh, Burlap, Coconut coir (the type used to line baskets and planters), Sheet moss, Twine, Fishing line, and more. The pocket may be filled with Peat or Sphagnum moss, Coconut coir, or Fafard® potting soil with extra Perlite added. Some people even use leaf

mold. Staghorn ferns do not have large root systems, and can access water and nutrients through their fronds. Although they love high humidity, it is important that they have good drainage and airflow to prevent potential disease issues. A key consideration for the wood-mount style is that you do not want to hang it on sheet rock or gypsum walls without a moisture barrier. Like other ferns, bathrooms can be an excellent location for your Staghorn to live. It is best to experiment to determine which method, medium, and location work best for you and your plants.

When mounted Staghorn ferns are too large to easily take down to soak, they can be thoroughly watered in place. Dedicated individuals set up drip irrigation systems.

Organic Management: Staghorn ferns have few significant pest issues. However, if issues arise, spot treating with Horticultural Oil is a good option.

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