

# The Victorian Fern Craze and the American Christmas Fern. ©

by John D. Scott. First published in the "Dodecatheon" newsletter of the Delaware Valley Chapter of the North America Rock Garden Society. November 2001.

"The Victorian Fern Craze—A History of Pteridomania" by David Elliston Allen is a delightful little book (83 pp. – 1969) describing the exploits of the European and British fern gardeners and explorers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. One aspect of the "Craze" was the production of very intricate interior Wardian cases. Another was the discovery and naming of hundreds of fern "freaks" or unusual forms of ferns – particularly lady fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*), male fern (*Dryopteris filix-mas*, a complex now comprising several species), and the Hart's-tongue fern (*Asplenium scolopendrium*).

The craze seemed to have passed America by – most likely because these same species in America are essentially free of these "freaky" abnormal forms. It may also be do to the fact the American botanists have been for the most part more interested in unraveling the complexities of the species involved in the fern complexes such as *Asplenium*, *Dryopteris*, and *Botrychium*.

This brings us to the Christmas fern, *Polystichum acrostichoides*. Current fern books have mostly ignored the interesting varieties of this eastern American native. *Ferns to Know and Grow* (F. Gordon Foster, 1984) states "The Christmas Fern has many variations and some have been named as forms." He illustrates five variations (unnamed) of pinnae. Mickel's *Ferns for American Gardens* (1994) lists 'Crispum', 'Cristatum' (photo), 'Incisum' and 'Multifidum' (photo). *The Plantfinder's Guide to Garden Ferns* (Martin Rickard, 2000) lists none. *The Fern Grower's Manual* (Barbara Joe Hoshizaki

& Robbin C. Moran, 2001) states "Various cultivar names are listed in the trade, such as 'Crispum', 'Cristatum' and 'Incisum'". I've seen the names as 'varieties' or 'forms' in botanies but have never seen them for sale.

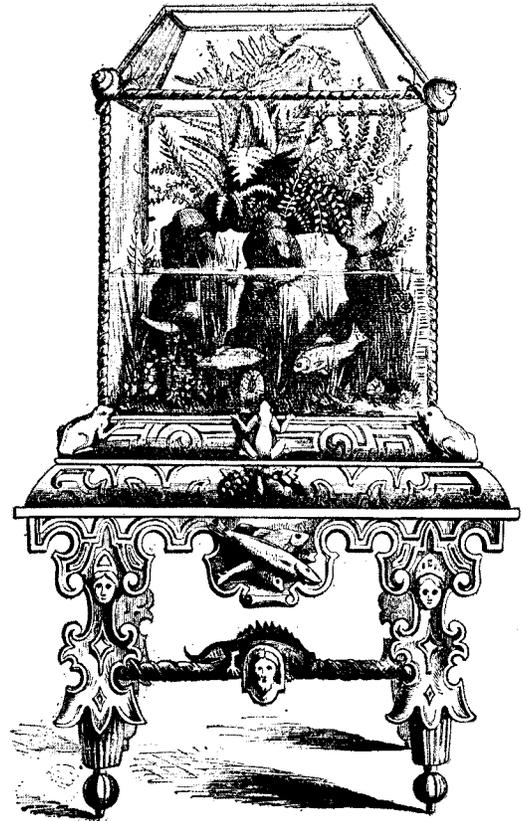
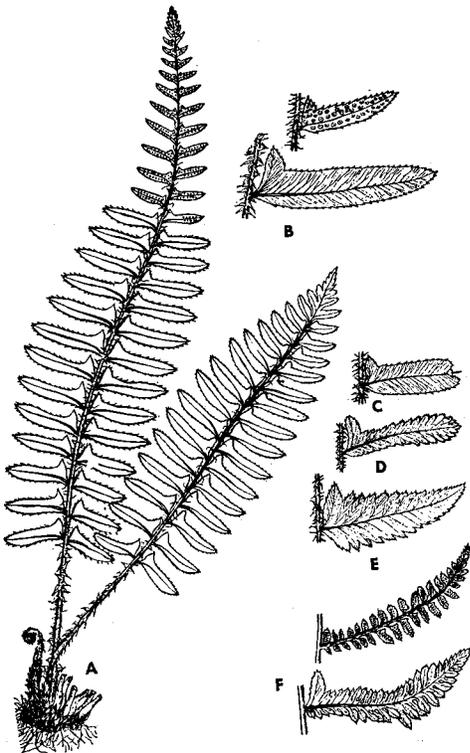


Figure 1. Wardian Case, Allen (1969)



CHRISTMAS FERN

A. Plant, reduced. Pinnae of forms: B. Type.  
C. Bristle tipped. D. Frilled. E. Incised. F. Twice-pinnate.

The Christmas fern is fairly common through out its range and has two characteristics that make is easy to recognize – one, its evergreen dark green fronds and two, its discrete pinna form. On any walk though the woods someone will cry out "there's the Christmas Fern". Every one will promptly agree and move on with out further notice. They have missed an opportunity to discover perhaps a new and unusual form.

My first wild garden was begun in earnest at age twelve at my parents' house in Marple, Delaware County, Pa. Our woods had a lot of Christmas ferns but they were all similar and the typical form. One day Dr. Edgar Wherry took me to a garden in Newtown Square. There, in a small woods, was lots of variation in form. Sometime later Dr. Wherry gave me a marvelous plant of the forms 'multifidum'. Recently I decided to actively find as many forms as I can. I began with a literature search and a survey and the specimens in the Herbarium of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia. The list of named and unnamed forms currently numbers twenty-three. **I request that anyone who can provide living specimens of unusual forms contact me.**

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Figure 2. The Fern Guide, Wherry (1961)