Over the last several years, the Hardy Fern Foundation has maintained, with the help of volunteers and the Arboretum staff, the Signature Bed and surrounding beds outside of the Graham Visitors Center. These beds were designed to give gardeners an idea of the diversity

ABOVE: The beautiful Blechnum chilense, introduced to Northwest gardens by the legendary Betty Miller.
of the world’s ferns and to show how they can be used in a garden setting. A quick walk around these small gardens shows the casual observer that not all ferns look alike and provides a taste of the textural delight that can be had in nearly any garden in the Northwest.

So many ferns thrive in our region that it can be overwhelming to select only a few to plant in your garden. Most gardeners are familiar with some of our stellar native ferns for the landscape, with sword fern, Polystichum munitum, and deer fern, Blechnum spicant, topping the list. These natives are very deserving of a home in the garden. (And frankly, some of them, such as sword fern and the lady fern, Athyrium filix-femina var. cyclosum, will often make themselves at home in the garden whether they are invited or not!) But what are some other ferns worthy of our attention? This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Hardy Fern Foundation, and what better way to celebrate than to highlight some of the choicest, most resilient, and less commonly planted ferns that the Foundation has championed for our Northwest gardens.

**Adiantum venustum**
The elegance of maidenhair ferns can be matched by few other plants. This queen of the garden is represented by several hardy species, but one of the most useful is the Himalayan maidenhair, *Adiantum venustum*. This hardy, low, evergreen species makes a stunning groundcover. The triangular fronds are composed of papery, translucent, bright-green leaflets, each shaped like a tiny gingko leaf. All of these leaflets are delicately connected on thin wiry black stems. The beauty of this ground cover is apparent in the way the fronds overlap each other, creating a fine-textured and layered pattern with fresh, pale-green new fronds overlaying older, deeper-green fronds. Though delicate in appearance, this maidenhair is quite tough and adaptable in the garden. Unlike many other types of maidenhair, *Adiantum venustum* prefers a well-drained soil rather than a constantly moist situation, and so established plantings only require occasional summer watering. The plant will thrive in moderate to bright or open shade, making it an excellent choice for woodland gardens.

Once only available through slow-to-establish divisions, this choice fern is now being micro-propagated in laboratories. These tissue-cultured plants are surprisingly vigorous and establish quickly in the garden. Spreading six to 10 inches a year, Himalayan maidenhair will quickly make a dense groundcover. Even
though this fern is evergreen, I recommend cutting it back in late December or January. The shrimp-pink new fronds start emerging by late February, and cutting the plant back at a later date runs the risk of removing the first flush of growth.

*Athyrium otophorum*

The genus *Athyrium* contains some of the best garden ferns and some of the worst! Our overly aggressive native *Athyrium filix-femina* var. *cyclosorum* is beautiful in the spring, with robust, brilliant green fronds reaching three to four feet tall; but then the fronds collapse in summer, leaving a haggard, tatty plant that freely produces young new ferns in the middle of more desirable plants and in every crack and crevice in patios and garden walls. A much better choice is the stylish *Athyrium otophorum*. This lovely fern from eastern Asia, saddled with the mundane common name eared lady fern, has colorful fronds that complement a graceful arching vase shape. In late April to early May, new fronds emerge with deep-purple stems contrasting against pale, whitish-green leaflets. As the foliage matures it retains a pale-minty color that will brighten shady areas through the growing season. Although this fern is not evergreen, its foliage will hold up well into late autumn. Fully grown plants reach about 15 to 18 inches tall and slightly wider, making the fern useful even in small gardens. Plant *Athyrium otophorum* in moderate to light shade, and in good soil supplemented with regular summer watering.
**Blechnum chilense**

The unusual and eye-catching Chilean hard fern, *Blechnum chilense*, holds a special place at the Elisabeth C. Miller Botanical Garden, where I work. The unique fern was introduced to North America by Mrs. Miller in her never-ending quest for excellent foliage plants. Nearly all of the Chilean hard ferns found in gardens today can be traced back to Mrs. Miller’s original plant. The robust spreading habit of this evergreen fern makes it easy to share with others, and the attractive, leathery, dark-green fronds make it desirable to all who see it. This fern performs best in protected locations with moist soils and nearly full sun. If the plant is properly sited, its fronds can reach up to five or six feet in height. If it is battered down by a cold winter, it will likely stay up to two or three feet tall. It is important to protect the crown with mulch for the first two winters to allow the roots to establish and enable the plant to begin developing side runners, which will eventually form a colony of plants. If you want to slow the spread of this fern, plant it in dry shade, where the fronds will be shorter and the growth less robust.

**Dryopteris tokyoensis**

Many urban gardens have limited space. A favorite for tight growing conditions is *Dryopteris tokyoensis*, the Tokyo wood fern. Slim, narrow fronds arranged in a narrow, upright vase shape allow the plant to fit into nearly any garden. The bright emerald green leaves will glow in a location where the early morning or late afternoon sun can shine through them. This choice *Dryopteris* is, of course, native to Japan, but also drifts into

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**The Hardy Fern Foundation Celebrates 25 Years**

The Hardy Fern Foundation (HFF) celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. Based at the Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden in Federal Way, Washington, the organization was founded in 1989 to establish a comprehensive collection of the world’s hardy ferns for display, testing, evaluation, public education and introduction to the gardening and horticultural community. Many rare and unusual species, hybrids and varieties are being propagated and tested in selected environments for their different degrees of hardiness and ornamental garden value. Several founding members of the HFF were active members of the Arboretum Foundation. Since the beginning of the HFF, the two organizations have maintained a close relationship that continues today with the HFF stewardship of the Signature Bed and nearby entry gardens of the Graham Visitors Center.

A final celebratory event, the Fall Fern Social, will be held at the newly built educational facilities of the Bellevue Botanic Garden, on October 11. This event will feature the largest display of fronds on the West Coast, along with a guest speaker and experts available to identify ferns. For more information about the social or the HFF, visit www.hardyfern.org or call 253-838-4646. Foundation membership starts at $25, and benefits include a quarterly newsletter, free entry to the Rhododendron Species Garden and access to the HFF spore exchange.
other Southeast Asian countries. In the garden, give it a site with good, regularly moist soil and bright, open shade or morning sun. At maturity, the plant will reach about 24 to 30 inches tall, but only have a spread of 12 to 15 inches.

**Osmunda regalis**

One of the most dramatic large ferns is the extremely tough and hardy royal fern, *Osmunda regalis*. This stately giant has an enormous natural distribution, from Europe and North, Central and South America to Asia, Africa, Madagascar and the islands of Mauritius and Reunion. The North American variety, *Osmunda regalis* var. *spectabilis*—native to the eastern half of the continent—is a fine plant reaching three to four feet in height, but the European cultivars can be truly impressive reaching over six feet in height. Some of the finest selections are ‘Purpurascens’, ‘Undulatifolia’ and ‘Cristata’.

This fern grows best with some sun. If it is in too much shade, the fronds become lax and brittle by midsummer. Providing at least a half day of sun will make the fronds stand tall and upright. The royal fern is deciduous and is one of the only ferns with good fall color, showing a clear butter yellow in early October. Occasionally, very rare cultivars can be found in the Northwest. A recent introduction to the area by Sue Olsen, one of the founders of the Hardy Fern Foundation, is *Osmunda regalis* ‘Decomposita,’ grown from spore from a German collector’s garden. The foliage of this unusual form is more finely divided than that of the straight species and gives the mature plant a uniquely feathery look. Have patience with ‘Decomposita’, because it will not show this foliage characteristic for the first few years.

Richie Steffen is the Curator at the Elisabeth C. Miller Botanical Garden and a member of the “Bulletin” Editorial Board. He is also vice president of the board of directors of the Hardy Fern Foundation.