Maidenhair ferns

By John Banasiewicz

Maidenhair ferns are among the most popular and admired ferns grown by amateurs and enthusiasts worldwide. They belong to the genus Adiantum, with approximately 200 species.



Adiantum sp. in a hanging basket. Photo: Fern Society of WA website archive.

Delicate looks, surprising variety

Although delicate in appearance, most Maidenhairs are fairly hardy. They occur naturally in temperate and tropical regions. Tropical species tend to be more difficult to grow locally and are best suited to a glasshouse.

Varieties range from those with the finest pinnae (leaflets) to the large-leafed “Silver Dollar”. Plants may be upright, standard or weeping, with plain, variegated or tasselled foliage.

Choose a sheltered, well-lit position

Maidenhairs are mostly grown in pots on patios, in shade houses or temporarily indoors. Weeping varieties are especially suitable for hanging containers. Choose a well-lit position out of direct sun, with air movement but no strong winds. Most are happy under Perspex roofing; some grow well in the garden with partial sun.

Use an open, well-drained mix

Use a high-quality potting mix with very good drainage. Peat moss, composted pine bark chips, perlite, vermiculite or charcoal can open up the mix. A very small quantity of garden lime, dolomite, shell grit or crushed eggshells is also beneficial. Maidenhairs prefer to be under-potted rather than over-potted.

Caring for Maidenhairs

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Water gently and adjust with the seasons

Provide adequate moisture in summer and reduce watering in cooler periods. Water by hand at pot level: heavy overhead watering can damage the foliage, especially finer varieties. Some misting during hot weather will not hurt them.

In very hot weather, a dish of water beneath the pot can provide humidity. Flush dishes occasionally and remove them altogether during cooler weather.

Feed lightly during the warmer months

Apply liquid fertiliser regularly at half the recommended strength. Fish emulsion or seaweed fertilisers, slow-release fertilisers and aged cow manure are also beneficial.

Watch for pests

Maidenhairs generally suffer little pest attack, apart from occasional mealybug or scale. Keep plants protected from snails and slugs.

Cut back in early spring

Except for tropical species, Maidenhairs may be cut back hard in early spring. Avoid doing this at other times, as it may harm the plants.

Choices for local growers

Suitable species include Adiantum aethiopicum, A. capillus-veneris, A. cunninghamii, A. formosum, A. hispidulum, A. pubescens and A. raddianum.

Recommended A. raddianum cultivars: Decorum, Elegans, Fragrantissimum, Fritz Luth, Legrandii, Pacific Lady, Pacific Maid, Pacottii, Splendens, Triumph, Variegated Tassellate, Variegated Pacottii, Victoria Elegans and Weigandii.