

Male fern

Dryopteris filix-mas



Identification

- Leaves up to 120cm long and 25cm wide, erect or arching, pale green, soft to leathery
- Deciduous (i.e. dies back in winter) with the dead leaves persisting
- Leaf stalk (stipe) grooved, covered with conspicuous straw-coloured scales
- Spore containers (sori) curled and in two rows on the underside of leaflets, changing colour from green in spring to dark brown in late summer
- Massive branching rhizome (underground stem) from which it regenerates in spring



Male fern sori.
Photo: M. von Tippelskirch

Similar species

Male fern looks superficially like many other ferns but especially like the native gully fern (*Pneumatopteris pennigera*) which is not deciduous. When taking all of the above identification features together male fern is easy to distinguish from other ferns.

Control

Before you control it make sure not to confuse it with native ferns. If in doubt consult an expert.

Manual: Dig out the whole rhizome including branches and dispose of it safely in a landfill or burn it.

Chemical: Spray with herbicide. Repeat treatments may be necessary to kill plants.

Replace with native ferns or ground cover. Consult your native nursery for the best suited ferns for your site. Use all herbicides in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions and ensure no herbicide comes into contact with other plants, the soil or waterways.

Where is it found?

Swamps, sand dunes, waterway margins, rocky outcrops, roadside ditches, in waste places, regenerating native forest, plantation forest and gardens.



Male fern in pine forest.
Photo: M. von Tippelskirch

Why is it a problem?

Male fern invades native habitats where it can out-compete native ferns and other native species. Male fern is becoming more widespread. It is often mistaken as a native fern. One plant is capable of producing hundreds of thousands of spores which germinate freely in damp shady sites. It is often a contaminant in nursery stock and so finds its way into gardens. It regenerates frequently from its rhizomes when discarded amongst other garden waste along road sides and stream banks. Male fern is toxic to humans and presumably to stock when eaten.



Male fern stipe base closeup.
Photo: M. von Tippelskirch

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