

Sphaeropteris cooperi Australian Tree Fern¹

Edward F. Gilman²

Introduction

The Australian tree fern is a tropical, single-trunked, giant fern that can reach a height of 15 to 30 feet. It has long, bipinnately compound, lacy leaves that give it a fine texture. The 1- to 1 1/2-foot-long leaves form a handsome canopy and impart a tropical effect. The fern produces one trunk that is woolly or russet in appearance, and it may attain a diameter of 1 foot. This plant reproduces by spores found on the undersides of mature leaves.

General Information

Scientific name: *Sphaeropteris cooperi*

Pronunciation: spheer-rop-TEER-riss KOOP-per-rye

Common name(s): Australian tree fern

Family: *Cyatheaceae*

Plant type: tree

USDA hardiness zones: 10B through 11 (Fig. 1)

Planting month for zone 10 and 11: year round

Origin: not native to North America

Uses: near a deck or patio; specimen; border; suitable for growing indoors

Availability: generally available in many areas within its hardiness range

Description

Height: 12 to 18 feet

Spread: 8 to 15 feet

Plant habit: upright

Plant density: open

Growth rate: slow



Figure 1. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Texture: fine

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: spiral

Leaf type: odd-pinnately compound

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: lanceolate

Leaf venation: none, or difficult to see

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen

Leaf blade length: less than 2 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: no flowers

Flower characteristic: no flowers

1. This document is FPS-557, one of a series of the Environmental Horticulture, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date October 1999. Revised May 2007. Reviewed June 2011. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Edward F. Gilman, professor, Environmental Horticulture Department, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611.

Fruit

Fruit shape: no fruit

Fruit length: less than .5 inch

Fruit cover: dry or hard

Fruit color: no fruit

Fruit characteristic: no fruit

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: no thorns; usually with one stem/
trunk

Current year stem/twig color: not applicable

Current year stem/twig thickness: not applicable

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in the shade

Soil tolerances: acidic; sand; loam; clay

Drought tolerance:

Soil salt tolerances: poor

Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: usually not a problem

Winter interest: no special winter interest

Outstanding plant: plant has outstanding ornamental
features and could be planted more

Invasive potential: not known to be invasive

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by
pests

Use and Management

Australian tree fern is delightful as a specimen plant in a shaded garden. It is often planted around a shaded pool or small pond for the double image created on the water. This is a wonderful landscape plant where winter temperatures do not drop below freezing. It is sure to illicit a comment from friends and passersby.

Australian tree fern prefers fertile, well-drained, sandy loam soils. An area in the landscape that receives partial to full shade is best. This plant requires regular moisture, and it needs light fertilizing at regular intervals during the growing season.

Australian tree fern is propagated by sowing the spores found on the undersides of mature leaves.

Pests and Diseases

Australian tree fern is bothered by mites and mealy bugs, and termites may inhabit its trunk. It usually resists diseases.