

# Nephrolepis exaltata Boston Fern, Sword Fern<sup>1</sup>

Edward F. Gilman, Ryan W. Klein, and Gail Hansen<sup>2</sup>

#### Introduction

This dependable, easy-to-grow fern produces great masses of long, narrow, pale green leaves, creating beautiful hanging baskets or gently arching out of raised containers. But sword fern also makes a wonderful ground cover, creating a dense, tropical effect, its 2 to 3 foot high, graceful fronds quickly spreading over the ground by means of thin, green runners. While somewhat invasive in ideal locations, sword fern can be controlled by thinning, the removed plants will transplant extremely well. It may be best to confine a grouping of plants with an edging such as plastic or metal to prevent spreading into unwanted areas.



Figure 1. Full Form - *Nephrolepis exaltata*: Boston Fern, Sword Fern Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS



Figure 2. Leaf - *Nephrolepis exaltata*: Boston Fern, Sword Fern Credits: Edward F. Gilman, UF/IFAS

### **General Information**

Scientific name: Nephrolepis exaltata

**Pronunciation:** neff-FRAHL-lepp-piss eck-sahl-TAY-tuh

Common name(s): Boston fern, sword fern, wild Boston

fern

Family: Davalliaceae

Plant type: perennial; herbaceous

**USDA hardiness zones:** 8B through 11 (Figure 3)

Planting month for zone 8: year-round

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Planting month for zone 9: year-round

Planting month for zone 10 and 11: year-round

Origin: native to North America

**Invasive potential:** potentially invasive

**Uses:** mass planting; container or above-ground planter; naturalizing; hanging basket; suitable for growing indoors

**Availability:** generally available in many areas within its hardiness range

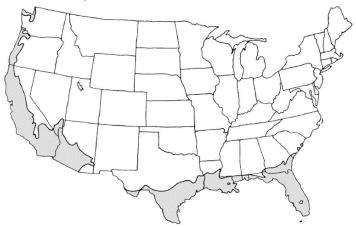


Figure 3. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

# **Description**

Height: 0.5 to 4 feet

**Spread:** depends upon supporting structure

Plant habit: upright

Plant density: moderate

Growth rate: fast

Texture: fine

### **Foliage**

**Leaf arrangement:** most emerge from the soil, usually without a stem

Leaf type: even-pinnately compound

Leaf margin: serrate; undulate

Leaf shape: lanceolate; ovate

Leaf venation: none, or difficult to see

Leaf type and persistence: semi-evergreen

Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: no fall color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

#### **Flower**

Flower color: no flowers

Flower characteristic: no flowers

#### **Fruit**

Fruit shape: no fruit

Fruit length: no fruit

Fruit cover: no fruit

Fruit color: no fruit

Fruit characteristic: no fruit

#### **Trunk and Branches**

Trunk/bark/branches: not applicable

Current year stem/twig color: not applicable

Current year stem/twig thickness: not applicable

#### **Culture**

**Light requirement:** plant grows in part shade/part sun; plant grows in the shade

**Soil tolerances:** occasionally wet; clay; sand; acidic; slightly alkaline: loam

Drought tolerance: moderate

Soil salt tolerances: poor

Plant spacing: 24 to 36 inches

#### Other

**Roots:** not applicable

Winter interest: no special winter interest

**Outstanding plant:** not particularly outstanding

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

## **Use and Management**

Growing in partial to deep shade, sword fern needs moist but well-drained soils until established but can later survive periodic bouts of dry weather. Light fertilizations are recommended during the growing season. Thick clumps can be stimulated by severe pruning, new fronds quickly sprouting from the roots. Plant on 12 to 24 inch centers for quick establishment.

Many cultivars are available for leaf structure, height and growth rate. 'Bostoniensis' is the classic indoor fern, with a spreading and arching growth habit; 'Fluffy Ruffles', 'Rooseveltii', and 'Whitmanii' all have more finely cut and feathery fronds.

Propagation is easily done by division of the clumps.

#### **Pests and Diseases**

Sword fern may at times be bothered by scale, mites, mealy bugs, snails, or slugs.

Fungal diseases may occasionally be a problem.