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staghorn fern



Photo courtesy of The John Henry Company

Platycerium bifurcatum
Staghorn fern, Stag's horn fern

BOTANICAL NAME

Platycerium bifurcatum
(plat-i-SEE-ri-um bi-fur-KAH-tum)

COMMON NAMES

Staghorn fern, Stag's horn fern

DESCRIPTION

Staghorn fern, like many of its fern relatives, is an epiphyte, meaning that, in its natural state, it typically grows on tree trunks, branches and rocks and absorbs nutrients and water from the air. Multiple *Platycerium* species exist today, including numerous hybrids, but *P. bifurcatum* is the most common and easiest to grow. It exhibits large,

dark-green fronds that fork, causing them to bear a striking resemblance to antlers. For display in the home, the large plants are typically mounted on wood or attached to wire baskets with sphagnum moss or other organic medium covering the root balls. A compact hybrid is also available.

DECORATIVE LIFE

With proper care, these plants can last for several years.

AVAILABILITY

Staghorn ferns are most widely available in spring and summer, but in mild climates, they can be found year-round.

in-store and consumer care

LIGHT Moderate light to partial shade is ideal for this forest-floor dweller. Full sun is likely to burn the plant's waxy leaves; however, too little light may cause the fern to grow slowly and make it more susceptible to disease.

WATER Regular light waterings, using water at room temperature, are recommended. Because these plants are extremely susceptible to damage from excess watering, some experts suggest that it's better to allow the plants to show slight wilting before they are watered. Plants will revive quickly once watered, but excess watering is likely to bring a quick end to staghorn fern plants.

TEMPERATURE Some *Platycerium* species can tolerate cool temperatures, including staghorn fern. Temperatures in excess of 50 F are recommended, and warmer temperatures, from 60 F to 80 F, are ideal.

HUMIDITY Staghorn ferns require high humidity, but they don't care to be misted. Instead, indirect humidity, from a humidifier or other source, is ideal.

FERTILIZER During warm weather months, from midspring through summer, monthly applications of a balanced plant food, mixed at half strength, can help support new growth.



Photo courtesy of Hermann Engelmann Greenhouses, Inc.

P. bifurcatum cultivar—Compact staghorn fern

PROPAGATION Offsets, sometimes called "pups," can be removed with their root systems intact and then re-established in damp sphagnum moss, but success with these may be difficult. The plants' fertile fronds (some fronds are sterile) also produce spores, but propagation from these is unlikely for all but the most experienced specialists.

PRUNING No pruning is required, but damaged leaves could be snipped off with sharp scissors. The rounded basal leaves should never be removed, even after they have died, because they provide humus as they decompose.

REPOTTING Replace the sphagnum moss or other organic medium annually.

challenges

PESTS AND PROBLEMS Mealybugs and scale insects occasionally infest staghorn ferns. Insecticides are typically effective but can

fun facts

WHAT'S IN A NAME The name *Platycerium* is derived from the Greek words "platys," meaning "broad," and "keras," for "horn."

FAMILY *Platycerium* plants are members of the *Polypodiaceae* family, which is an all-fern family.

HOME SWEET HOME *Platycerium* are tropical plants and are native to Southeast Asia, Australia and Africa.

damage the plants, so take care when using these and opt for insecticides that are not oil based. The most common challenge, however, is with excessive watering, which can lead to fungal disease and root rot.

LEAF CONCERNS Black spots on the basal leaves typically indicate a fungus that often results from overwatering. To reduce the damage, suspend watering and reduce humidity. Chemical products to treat the fungal disease are also available. **sfr**

Some information provided by:
The Complete Houseplant Survival Manual, by Barbara Pleasant
Dictionary of Plant Names, by Allen J. Coombes
Hermann Engelmann Greenhouses, Inc., www.exoticangel.com
The Houseplant Encyclopedia, by Ingrid Jantra and Ursula Krüger
The House Plant Expert, by Dr. D.G. Hessayon
The University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS), www.ifas.ufl.edu

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