

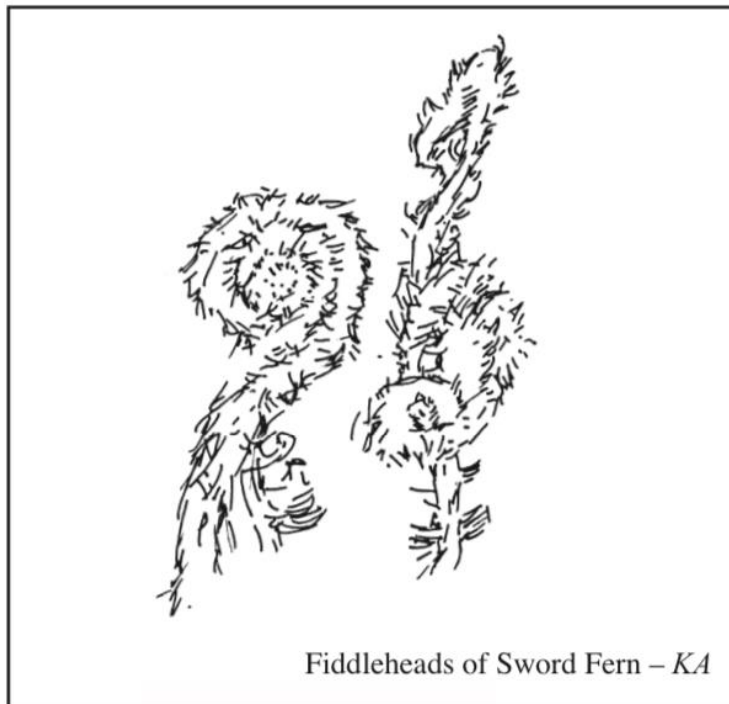
Epimedium and Sword Ferns

By Cass Turnbull

Epimedium

“March is a mowing month.” That’s a little Turnbull family mnemonic. More importantly, early March is the last opportunity gardeners in the PNW have to “mow down” the sword ferns (*Polystichum munitum*) and Epimedium (various species). Last year I was a bit too late (again) for the epimedium. New flowers were already shooting up through the old, blotched, beaten leaves. What the heck—I whacked it all off to the ground anyway. Over the next month, up came a host of unblemished new leaves, which is the point of this annual exercise. Whew!

Needless to say, it is preferable to do this task two weeks earlier—before the flower stems emerge, but after the danger of frost has passed. At this point you can easily shear all the leaves off with hedge shears, leaving a barren mound with 1-2” of old leaf stems. Then wait for the flowers and leaves to grow and enjoy them both.



Epimedium, if you’re not yet familiar with it, is a really nice clumping groundcover. I think a lot of horticulturalists might put it in the ‘choice’ category because, although it is tough, it doesn’t run rampant in the garden. It has two-inch, ovoid or heart-shaped leaves that sort of hover on wiry stems. The leaves are green with tints of bronzy-pink. And it is delicate-looking, reminding me of columbine, thalictrum or rue. Its leaves are favored by leaf-cutter bees. It took me years to spot the actual bee, but I always noticed its characteristic scalloped “cut” on a leaf edge. These bees never inflict significant damage. It always makes me smile to know that I have

detected their presence in the garden.

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The flowers of epimedium are, in my opinion, a secondary feature. They rise on their own wiry stems and are nifty, small parachutes or “inside-out” flowers. They’re usually yellow, but rarer species bloom white or pink. I must say that I like its little brother, *Vancouveria*, even better. It’s a native groundcover, and roughly the same thing as epimedium but in miniature. Because it can be rampant, be careful where you plant it. I use it in my favorite planting under vine maples in my own yard: *Vancouveria*, *Helleborus orientalis*, wild bleeding heart (*Dicentra formosa*), trillium and sword fern. If you have a wild or woodland area in your garden, I highly recommend this combination

Sword Ferns

Not many horticulturalists would think of sword ferns as ‘choice’. Nevertheless, I am a big fan. People tend to place high value on those plants which are difficult. (For the same reason that men often fall for “high maintenance” women?) Sword ferns are just too easy and too common. Tough as nails, they live in sun or shade, sand or clay; they’re evergreen, and drought-tolerant, and never get “too big”; they add foliar contrast, and transplant easily. And they are one of the few plants that have a chance to make it under our native conifers. When I renovate mature gardens, I am confident that I will be able to find a few ferns hidden in the yard somewhere, perfect to dig and move for an on-the-spot garden make-over.

I guess I can’t say they never get too big. Sometimes, if they are next to a walkway, or if they have been breeding in a confined space, sword ferns may need to be dug and moved. Usually this is pretty easy. Occasionally it is not. My first sword fern transplant was a fern-from-hell. I’d say about one in twenty is a bear to move. The same might be said of rhodies. Sometimes you can get away with making a big sword fern moderately smaller and cleaner looking. This can be achieved by cutting all the fronds off, leaving a barren mound in late February or early March. As they start to emerge, the new fronds are a cluster of cute, furry- looking nubs. Then they unfurl as “fiddleheads”, quite interesting to behold. Before the new fiddleheads unfurl, you can cut the entire set of old fern fronds off quickly, with a hedge shears if you like. But if you wait until the fiddleheads begin to do their thing, you must slowly and painstakingly pick between them to cut off each frond separately. Otherwise the delicate fiddleheads break. I hear they are edible. You’ll have to ask Arthur Lee Jacobson how they taste. I’ve never been tempted to eat anything furry.

If I get to sword ferns too late, I am apt to let them go au naturel for another year—no harm in that. The new fronds will emerge and the old ones eventually turn brown and fold down, still attached, to the ground. Most new customers never think to de-frond their ferns, and I usually keep them in the dark until I have worked their yards into good shape over a few years. Then, when I have a little more time in the spring, I might groom them. The problem is that the renewed ferns look so much nicer I am forever after expected to spruce them up each spring.