**Nephrolepis exaltata**

Edward F. Gilman

**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 (Fig. 1). But Sword Fern also makes a wonderful groundcover, creating a dense, tropical effect, its two to three-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 transplanting 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.

**General Information**

- **Scientific name:** Nephrolepis exaltata
- **Pronunciation:** neff-FRAHL-lepp-piss eck-sahl-TAY-tuh
- **Common name(s):** Boston Fern, Sword Fern
- **Family:** Davalliaceae
- **Plant type:** perennial; herbaceous
- **USDA hardiness zones:** 8B through 11 (Fig. 2)
- **Planting month for zone 8:** year round
- **Planting month for zone 9:** year round
- **Planting month for zone 10 and 11:** year round
- **Origin:** native to North America
- **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

**Description**

- **Height:** .5 to 4 feet
- **Spread:** depends upon supporting structure
- **Plant habit:** upright
- **Plant density:** moderate
- **Growth rate:** fast
- **Texture:** fine

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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

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

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Other

**Roots:** not applicable  
**Winter interest:** no special winter interest  
**Outstanding plant:** not particularly outstanding  
**Invasive potential:** potentially invasive  
**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.

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

**Pests and Diseases**

Fungus diseases may occasionally be a problem.