

This past Memorial Day while Rita and I were out and about, we found a most unusual bird's nest. Never before had either of us seen one like it. It was absolutely beautiful. As a result, we purchased it.

Let me clarify. I'm obviously not referring to a typical bird's nest, one that is actually constructed by a bird. Who'd buy that kind of a bird's nest? I am referring to a plant with the botanical name *Asplenium nidus* '*Crispafolium*'— more commonly known as a bird's nest fern.

Ferns are special plants lacking flowers. Without flowers, they produce no seeds. They reproduce by spores, formed in capsules called sori, which usually appear as dark spots located on the underside of their leaves. Botanically these leaves are called fronds.

Bird's nest ferns are indigenous to tropical places such as Hawaii, Polynesia and parts of Africa. Bird's nest fern is one of the more unusual ferns. It can grow either terrestrially, which means on the ground; or epiphytically, in the air without soil. In nature it is frequently found growing attached high on the trunks and branches of



rainforest trees. To be classified as an epiphytic plant, the plant needs only air, sunlight and high humidity. Keep in mind, although attached to trees, bird's nest ferns are not parasitic. The nest-shaped funnel of their fronds collects rainwater and nutrient-bearing dust from the air, similarly to a bromeliad. However, when attached to the soil, bird's nest ferns also obtain nutrients through their roots.

This species of fern has long, lance-shaped, bright green fronds that unroll from a central mass of hair-like, brown-black fibers that resemble a bird's nest— thus its name. The fronds are smooth and entire, lacking teeth or lobes. Spore capsules are produced in straight lines on the undersides of the fronds. Under ideal growing conditions, the fronds can reach five feet in length and four to five inches in width. Well over seven hundred species of *Asplenium* exist



throughout the world. There are several named cultivars. Our cultivar is '*Crispafolium*'. The distinguishing quality of this cultivar is fronds that are exceptionally wavy along the edges.

Since bird's nest fern is tropical, it is only hardy in Zones 10 and 11. It succeeds best with daytime temperatures around 70° F and nighttime temperatures around 60° F. Growing one in Nebraska might prove to be a challenge. Growing ours on the deck in dappled shade should prove relatively easy for this summer; however, I anticipate caring for it though the winter may be more difficult.

Having conducted research, I discovered that bird's nest's graceful arching fronds should be given enough room so they do not touch anything, or they will be easily damaged. It thrives in low light conditions. Direct sunlight will cause the fronds to scorch and turn brown. Scale insects sometimes attack this fern. If found, they should be removed by hand. Chemical insecticides are toxic to *Asplenium* ferns and should never be used.

Digging further, I discovered some good news. Bird's nest fern is one of the easiest ferns to grow indoors. Although in the wild it grows as an epiphyte, in cultivation it can be successfully grown in a container filled with humus-rich potting soil. The soil should be kept moist at all times except during the winter months. It should then be watered only when it begins to dry out. Bird's nest fern prefers bright but not direct light such as in a north-facing window. It thrives with a humidity level of 40% or greater, but it survives better under drier conditions than any other houseplant fern. For maximum performance, the container should be placed on a tray of pebbles and filled with water. A regular misting also helps keep the fronds bright green.

Knowing all this, I am convinced we should be successful growing this plant on our deck for the summer. Perhaps, the challenge will be taking it indoors for the winter. However, for now, we will continue to enjoy the exceptional beauty of our recently purchased bird's nest—bird's nest fern that is.