

The Boston Fern Guide

Nephrolepis exaltata 'Bostoniensis'



How to use this guide

The weight of the pot. The feel of the mix. The color of a new frond. The pattern of browning at the tips. Good care begins by noticing what changed before deciding what to do.

THE ONE-CHANGE RULE

Change one condition.
Record what happened. Give
the plant time to answer.

Contents

PLANT IDENTITY	
BOTANICAL	<i>Nephrolepis exaltata</i> 'Bostoniensis'
FAMILY	Polypodiaceae
ORIGIN	Tropical and subtropical Americas
HABIT	Arching, stolon- forming fern

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Start with the condition you can observe. Avoid making several changes at once.
The printable log at the end is part of the care system, not an afterthought.



Plant profile

Boston Fern is a selection of the tropical sword fern, *Nephrolepis exaltata*. Its numerous one-pinnate fronds rise from a crowded center and curve outward, forming the familiar soft, cascading silhouette.

Care at a glance

Medium-bright filtered light, consistent root-zone moisture, humid air, and enough drainage to keep the mix oxygenated.

LIGHT

Give it medium-bright filtered light. Shield the fronds from hot direct sun, especially behind south- or west-facing glass.

WATER

Keep the mix evenly moist, not wet. Water thoroughly as the surface begins to lose its damp feel, then drain it fully.

HUMIDITY

Humid air helps protect the many thin leaflet edges. Keep air moving gently and avoid placing the fern against heating vents.

WARMTH

Normal indoor warmth suits active growth. Protect the plant from cold drafts, frost, and abrupt temperature swings.

SOIL

Use a moisture-retentive but well-drained indoor mix in a container with unobstructed holes.

UPKEEP

Remove old fronds at the base, inspect for scale and spider mites, and divide crowded plants in spring when needed.

THE RELIABLE DEFAULT

Choose medium-bright filtered light. Keep the mix consistently moist, then let every excess drop leave the pot.

Light

Window direction is only the beginning. Trees, buildings, season, curtains, and distance all change the light that reaches each frond.

TOO INTENSE

Pale, scorched, or crisp patches after exposure to hot direct sun.

USEFUL RANGE

Medium-bright filtered light supports dense green fronds. Gentle morning sun can be useful.

TOO DIM

Sparse, stretched growth, darker weak fronds, or a crown that produces fewer new fronds.

ADJUST SLOWLY

Move the plant in stages. Fronds formed in shade can scorch after a sudden move into stronger light.

READ THE WHOLE PLANT

One older frond fading is different from widespread paling or edge burn. Judge light by the pattern across new and established growth.



Placement

Choose medium-bright filtered light and keep the fern clear of hot sun, cold glass, and drying vents. A bathroom can help only when it also provides adequate daylight.

Watering

Keep the full root zone evenly moist while preserving air between particles. The goal is steady moisture followed by free drainage, never prolonged saturation.



Wet the mix evenly, let the pot drain completely, and empty any water collected below.

01

CHECK BELOW

Touch the surface and compare the pot's weight. Water as the surface begins to lose its damp feel, before the root ball dries through.

02

WATER EVENLY

Apply room-temperature water slowly across the surface until the entire root zone is moistened.

03

LET IT FINISH

Let the pot finish draining, then empty its saucer or cachepot. Fine roots decline when the mix remains saturated and airless.

Humidity and temperature

Humid air protects the fern's many thin leaflet edges, but it must be paired with gentle air movement and a well-drained root zone.

WARM ROOMS

Typical indoor temperatures suit active growth. Wisconsin Extension notes a preference for nights near 65°F (18°C); protect the plant before outdoor temperatures fall into the low 40s°F.

HUMIDITY

Dry indoor air often browns leaflet tips and edges. A room humidifier or a naturally humid, well-lit room is more reliable than repeatedly misting the fronds.

WINTER

Heating can lower indoor humidity while growth slows. Keep the root ball from drying completely, but check more carefully before watering.

PROTECT THE MARGINS

A brown tip cannot turn green again. Improve the next frond by stabilizing moisture, humidity, and fertilizer.

Potting mix and fertilizer



A fine, organic mix should hold useful moisture while allowing excess water and air to move through.

POTTING MIX

Use a peat- or coir-based indoor mix amended with fine bark, vermiculite, or small perlite for structure. Avoid dense garden soil, collapsed old mix, oversized pots, and sealed containers.

FERTILIZER

Use a balanced houseplant fertilizer at half the labeled strength every four to six weeks during active growth. Reduce feeding substantially in winter.

Boston Fern anatomy



Numbered markers correspond to the definitions at right.

1 FROND

The entire leaf, including its blade and supporting stalk, rising from the fern's crowded center.

2 PINNA

One leaflet attached along the frond's central axis; the plural is pinnae.

3 RACHIS

The central axis of the frond, carrying the pinnae on either side.

4 SORI

Orderly round clusters of spore-producing structures on the undersides of fertile pinnae.

5 CROZIER

A tightly coiled young frond that gradually unfurls; also called a fiddlehead.

6 STOLON

A slender runner that can root where it contacts moist mix and form another plant.

Frond care and grooming



PROTECT NEW GROWTH

Young croziers are tender and easily bent. Give the crowded center room and avoid forcing new fronds past furniture or a wall.

RECOGNIZE SORI

Regular rows of round brown dots beneath mature pinnae are normal spore clusters, not scale insects or disease.

REMOVE AT THE BASE

Cut a fully brown or damaged frond close to the soil line. Trimming the tip alone does not restore the frond's natural arch.

CLEAN GENTLY

Rinse dust with a gentle shower of room-temperature water, then let the foliage drain and dry with moving air.

BROWN TIPS ARE EVIDENCE

Dry air, uneven moisture, excess fertilizer, or dissolved salts can all mark the margins. Correct the cause and judge progress by new growth.

Troubleshooting

Check the pattern, the root zone, and the recent change before reaching for a remedy.

WHAT YOU SEE	WHAT TO INSPECT	FIRST RESPONSE
Brown tips or edges	Dry air, uneven moisture, fertilizer strength, dissolved salts, or hot airflow.	Stabilize moisture and humidity; pause feeding while you identify the pattern.
Yellowing fronds	Saturated mix, poor drainage, old naturally fading fronds, or too little useful light.	Check the root zone and drainage before increasing water or fertilizer.
Wilting or shedding	A dry root ball, root loss in wet mix, cold exposure, or a recent move.	Inspect moisture and roots; restore stable conditions without stacking remedies.
Black or mushy center	Persistently wet mix, blocked drainage, or spreading crown and root decay.	Unpot promptly, remove clearly rotted tissue, and correct drainage.
Speckling, webbing, or scale	Frond undersides, rachises, leaflet bases, and the crowded center.	Separate the plant, confirm the pest, and follow a labeled treatment.

DO NOT STACK REMEDIES

Extra water, fertilizer, repotting, heavy pruning, pesticide, and a new location applied together can increase stress and erase the evidence. Change one condition at a time unless roots or the crown are actively failing.

Repotting



A healthy root ball is dense with fine, firm roots and short rhizomes; black, mushy tissue indicates decay.

01

PREPARE

Choose a pot with a drainage hole, only slightly wider than the existing root ball.

02

INSPECT

Loosen the outer mix gently. Preserve firm roots and trim only tissue that is clearly black, hollow, or soft.

03

SET

Set the crown at its former depth and work fresh mix around the roots without burying emerging croziers.

04

SETTLE

Settle the mix lightly rather than compacting it. Water thoroughly, then let the pot drain completely.

WHEN TO ACT

Repot in spring when the mix has collapsed, drainage has slowed, or the root ball is tightly crowded. Wisconsin Extension recommends repotting or dividing every few years.

Propagation

Division is the most reliable household method. Each section needs living roots, a piece of the crown, and enough healthy fronds to support recovery.



Divide a mature crowded plant in spring, keeping a substantial root system and several fronds with every section.

01

CHOOSE

Work in spring with a mature, crowded plant that has several healthy crowns and a strong root system.

02

DIVIDE

Cut vertically through the root ball into halves or quarters, keeping roots and fronds with every section.

03

REPOT

Set each crown at its former depth in a proportionate pot filled with fresh, moisture-retentive mix.

04

RECOVER

Keep in filtered light with steady moisture and humid air while the divisions establish.

WHY NOT SPORES?

Spores can produce ferns, but named cultivars may not come true and the process is much less practical at home than division.

Seasonal care

Indoor seasons change light, drying time, humidity, and the pace of new frond growth. Adjust from observation rather than the calendar alone.

OBSERVE	SPRING	SUMMER	AUTUMN	WINTER
LIGHT	Increase filtered light gradually.	Protect from hot midday sun.	Reassess as daylight shortens.	Use the brightest safe position.
WATER	Keep new growth evenly moist.	Check frequently in heat.	Adjust as drying slows.	Prevent both saturation and drought.
FEED	Begin half-strength feeding.	Continue every four to six weeks.	Reduce as growth slows.	Feed very little in low light.
PROJECTS	Repot or divide crowded plants.	Move outdoors only to full or partial shade.	Inspect before bringing indoors.	Protect from vents and dry heat.

THE USEFUL SCHEDULE

Schedule observations. Let the observations determine the care.

Pet safety

The ASPCA lists Boston Fern, *Nephrolepis exaltata* 'Bostoniensis', as non-toxic to dogs and cats.

PRACTICAL PRECAUTIONS

Non-toxic does not mean edible. Place the plant where pets are unlikely to chew fronds, roots, or potting mix.

Collect fallen pinnae, removed fronds, division debris, wire, and loose potting mix promptly.

Prevent access to hanging hardware or brittle ceramic pots that can cause injury if pulled down.

Keep fertilizers, pesticides, and potting materials secured.

WHAT TO DO

Chewing plant material can still cause stomach upset, and fertilizers or pesticides may be harmful. Contact a veterinarian if a pet develops symptoms or may have swallowed plant-care products.

ASPCA ANIMAL POISON CONTROL

(888) 426-4435

A consultation fee may apply.

This guidance applies to correctly identified *Nephrolepis exaltata*. Keep the botanical name and any product labels available when seeking veterinary advice.

Observation log: before a change

Use one page for one care decision. Print extra copies of pages 18-19 whenever you need them.

PLANT NAME OR IDENTIFYING NOTE

DATE

LOCATION AND WINDOW DIRECTION

WHAT I OBSERVED

POTTING MIX BEFORE WATERING

☐ Wet ☐ Moist ☐ Dry at surface ☐ Dry one inch ☐ Not checked

ONE ACTION I TOOK

Observation log: follow-up

Return after enough time has passed to notice a meaningful response. Avoid adding a second change too quickly.

FOLLOW-UP DATE

DAYS SINCE THE CHANGE

WHAT CHANGED NEXT

WHAT STAYED THE SAME

MY NEXT OBSERVATION DATE AND WHY

☐ Continue ☐ Reassess ☐ Seek expert help ☐ No further action

Continue observing

Keep the guide. Reprint the log. Let observation become the routine.