

Forest Farming Quick Guide

Ostrich Fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*)

The Ostrich Fern is a deciduous, perennial plant native to Eastern North America. The “fiddlehead” of these ferns refers to the edible immature fronds that are sought-out as a delicacy for cooking. It is a popular ornamental plant in gardens that serves as cover for small mammals and birds. The cultivation of Ostrich Fern provides an opportunity for the grower to enhance native biodiversity while sustainably promoting a high-value crop.

Site Selection:

- Partial to full shade conditions alongside streams and river floodplains.
- Rich, moist, well-drained soils that are high in organic matter, with a pH between 5.5 and 6.5.
- Presence of indicator herbs in the forest understory, including trillium, bloodroot and trout lily.

Site Preparation and Maintenance:

- Remove large sticks and debris that will interfere with planting.
- Remove any invasive species from the site, and selectively prune any trees or shrubs to reduce competition.
- Regularly inspect plantings for signs of disease, mortality, or pests.
- Repeat weeding and pruning as needed.

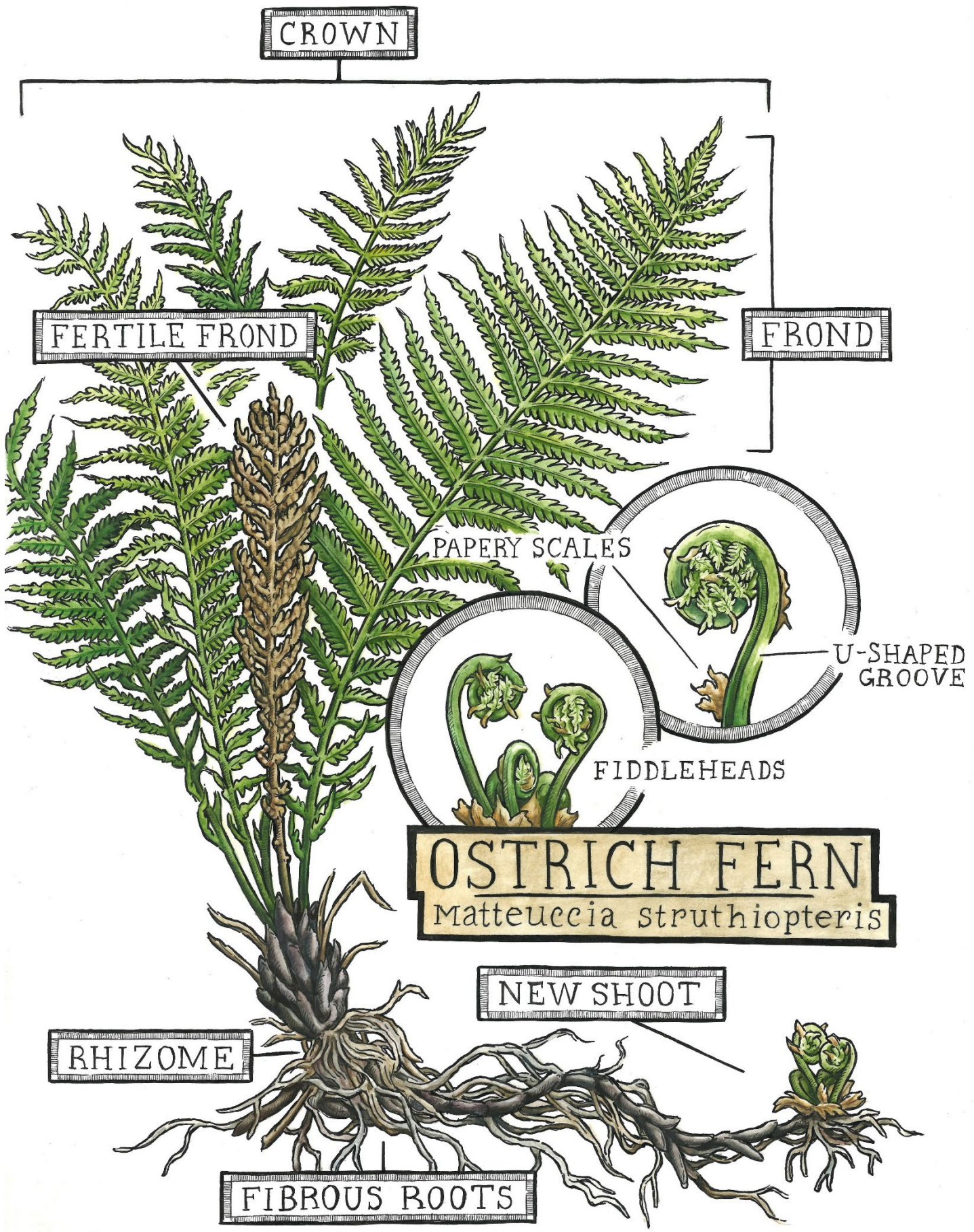
Propagation:

- To propagate via rhizome division, dig mature rhizomes out of the soil and divide each clump.
- Shake dirt off the roots and separate the clumps - some may need to be cut at the rhizome.
- Replant the separate clump into the soil, making sure to water the newly-planted fern during dry spells for the first few months.

Sustainable Harvesting:

- Harvest tightly curled fiddleheads in the springtime when their height reaches two to six inches.
- Harvest from healthy crowns that have at least four fiddleheads and collect no more than half of the fiddleheads on any crown. Do not re-harvest the same site for the rest of the year.
- Snap or cut off the stem up to 2 inches below the curled end without damaging other fronds.
- *Note:* Fiddleheads require proper preparation prior to eating. Refer to University of Maine Extension’s Food Safety Facts bulletin: <https://extension.umaine.edu/publications/4198e/>





CROWN

FERTILE FROND

FROND

PAPERY SCALES

U-SHAPED GROOVE

FIDDLEHEADS

OSTRICH FERN
Matteuccia struthiopteris

NEW SHOOT

RHIZOME

FIBROUS ROOTS