

# Talking Plants Blog

---

[npr.org/sections/talkingplants/2007/11/fernier\\_than\\_thou.html](http://npr.org/sections/talkingplants/2007/11/fernier_than_thou.html)

## Fernier Than Thou

---

November 16, 2007 10:31 AM ET

Ketzel Levine

It all started with an e-mail from the celebrated California horticulturist and landscape designer, Roger Raiche, titled "With Fronds Like These, Who Needs Anemones":

In one of those small triumphs that will never change the world, but which are personally very satisfying, I finally came across a rare variant of a common fern that I had been hoping to find for nearly 25 years now.

I got the e-mail yesterday and once I found a few hours to read it (I jest, but it *is* the size of a magazine article), I thought of you guys, or shall I say I thought of the bonafide plant freaks among you.

His story is a very simple one. It's about his decades-long search for the native Californian Lyman fern, not because it was rare or endangered -- in fact, it's in the trade -- but because he simply wanted to see it in its native haunts.



Here's the fern plantsman Roger Raiche has been searching for lo! these many years. The caption in his e-mail read, "Depending on robustitude, the pinnae or side leaflets can be toothed or lobed or both. This is the Garnett Creek site."

photo credit: Roger Raiche

It's a story for fern lovers, plant hunters, grail-seekers and hortiholics. If you've got a little down time and words like polypody and pinnae don't scare you, read on...

In one of those small triumphs that will never change the world, but which are personally very satisfying, I finally came across a rare variant of a common fern that I had been hoping to find for nearly 25 years now.

The story starts at the UC Botanical Garden at Berkeley around 1982 when Kurt Zadnik and I were cleaning up one of the beds down by the small creek that enters the Californian Area from a pipe in Centennial Drive, just below the entrance (at that time parking area). This creek is called Winter Creek and is a small tributary of Strawberry Creek, though its source is mostly parking lots and culverts upstream.

Anyway, while I was cleaning up Bed 16, I uncovered a small patch of what I thought was an especially lovely fern, called the Lyman fern, which is an unusual variant of the California polypody fern, *Polypodium californicum*. Unlike the typical species -- which is very widespread and especially noticeable during the winter (since it goes deciduous in the dry season) -- the Lyman fern has boldly toothed and lobed margins on its pinnae (the side leaflets off of the main central leaf stem), which gives it an even "fernier" look, which is quite lovely. I believe this fern had been planted in the California Areas by Harry Roberts, the person who first laid out the California Area in the early 50's (he preceded Wayne Roderick who is generally credited with "creating" the California collection).

I didn't know much about the Lyman fern, but as luck would have it, there appeared a short article on it in *Fremontia*, the journal of the California Native Plant Society, sometime during the early 80's (I believe) discussing the history of this rare form. Although I don't have the article any longer, I remember it saying that the original plant had been collected by a Sarah Lyman in the late 19th century from somewhere on her family's ranch near St. Helena in the Napa Valley, and had been grown on by fern enthusiasts ever since due to it's lovely appearance (there's still a Lyman Lane north of the town of St. Helena today). I may be wrong on this, but I believe the article stated that this form hadn't been found since in the wild, and that it had occurred with the typical species.

Regardless, this sparked my imagination at the time, and I was convinced that I too could find a variant such as this, especially considering how many thousands of acres of California get covered with this fern every rainy season -- every mossy rock, every shady bank cut, even tree trunks and especially those cool shady rocky canyons so common in the various mountain ranges of the state. So every winter, for over two decades now, every time I would pass some fern encrusted rock or stream side, I would quickly glance at those thousands of fronds to see if there were anything unusually ruffled.

But the years went by and I did not find or see anything out of the ordinary. When I moved to Calistoga two years ago, my interest was rekindled, as, after all; I wasn't that far from where Sarah had found her plant over a hundred years ago. Also our creekside is seasonally smothered in California polypody starting just about a week after the first good rain, and persisting until June or July -- depending on the season.

It's not that I don't like the typical species -- it's gorgeous when in full frond and literally turns our creekside into a "fern canyon" during the moist months, but I always have enjoyed looking for "something different" or out of the ordinary -- and I might add immodestly, I'm very good at it. But since I wasn't noticing anything out of the ordinary with our polypodies, I was pleased to notice that the Lyman fern finally had made it "big time" in the nursery trade as several North Bay nurseries had it in their inventories by the dozen (previously it had been almost impossible to find commercially). I even bought a flat (16, 4" pots) of vigorous plants from Phil Van Soelen at Cal Flora Nursery last fall to add to my garden here in Calistoga -- since I was ready to concede that I would probably never find my own patch, and, as the saying goes, "A bird in the hand is worth two on the rock".

Last winter I did notice one area along Garnett Creek that had a few fronds that looked a little different, but since the season (much like this year) had started with rain and then had a long dry gap before the next soaking, and this dry period visibly affected the polypody that had had the "nerve: to resprout early, causing much die-back and stunting. Thus this little area, I assumed, was probably just distorted and distressed fronds that weren't getting enough rainfall to develop correctly. And although this season was somewhat of a repeat in terms of rain, the month gap was not quite as harsh, and the polypody that emerged in early October somehow seemed to survive this dry period with much more grace and aplomb, until last week's refresher rainfall.

Two days ago, while taking the dogs for a walk along the creek, I noticed "last years patch" and was struck by how different they looked. Not trusting my brain to actually remember the distinctions, I picked a frond to take back up to the house, to compare with the 'Sarah Lyman' form that I had bought from Cal Flora the previous year (which had returned lustily, and which I had purposely watered to make sure they made it through the lean water weeks, since these were in much more sun and exposure than the native ones down by the creek). When I got back up to the house and compared the two, I realized they were exactly the same.

Thus the triumph. I had finally found another patch of Sarah Lyman's lovely variant, and almost, but probably not exactly, on our own property (we really don't know where our property line is in the creek, and like most property owners, I like to be expansive).

Everybody has the "life lists", birds to see, places to go, things to accomplish; and now I was finally able to check off a goal I had had since my early days at the Bot Garden. It's a small thing, it won't ensure world peace or abate global warming, or even pay the bills, but it's very satisfying all the same.

Fronldly yours,

Roger Raiche

Well, if you made it this far, congrats. You are indeed a geek of the highest order, and frondlier than thou. Cto share your own stories of discovery? Bring 'em on.