



*Onoclea sensibilis*

**Sensitive Fern**

*Dryopteridaceae* (Wood fern family)

Blooming season:

No flowers, but plant emerges in spring.

Plant:

Plant is perennial: fronds tightly rolled to protect sori which are persistent over winter to drop spores in the spring.

Sterile stipes are 10-50 cm long and are reddish brown at base and become straw colored near the top.

Fertile stipes are 15-35 cm long and are reddish brown to straw colored at the base but straw colored at the top.

The rhizomes are long, creeping, reddish brown to brown, 2-9mm in diameter, and produce scattered stipes.



Leaves:

Fronds are strongly dimorphic, either singly or in groups.

Sterile fronds are triangular to ovate in shape and 3-13 dm long; are deeply pinnate/toothed/lobed.

They are yellow-green. The sterile fronds wither and turn brown when it frosts.

Fertile fronds are bipinnate and less noticeable at on 3-7 dm long. They begin green and turn black at maturity. They curl up tightly to protect the sori found inside and continue over winter for possibly up to 2-3 years.

Flower:

No flowers.

Fruit:

No fruit, but spores are found on sori tightly rolled in the fertile fronds that look like brown berry like structures.

The greenish spores mature in October-November but are released in the spring after the frond unrolls.

Can be confused with:

No other ferns to be found in the Kasey Hartz Natural Area that are both triangular to ovate in shape and so deeply lobed. Yellow-green color is also relatively different from the other fern species.

Geographic range:

Type specimen location: Creek Bed Habitat.

State: Found abundantly through the Upper and Lower Peninsula of Michigan.

Regional: Found abundantly from Labrador to Manitoba, Florida, Texas, to Colorado.

# Kasey Hartz Natural Area Reference Sheet



Muskegon Community College

*Onoclea sensibilis*

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## **Sensitive Fern**

### Habitat:

Local: Moist habitats by the road side, in fields, the forest, and low places.

Regional: Found in marshes, swamps, moist woodlands, along river banks, wet sub acidic soil, low woods, and many times found in thick stands.

### Common local companions:

Maples, mayapples, spicebush, and other wetland species.

### Usages:

Human: Cultivated in moist, partial shade gardens, but not widely since the plant grows weedy (USDA-Plants Database). The young fiddleheads are commonly eaten cooked like asparagus or raw (MacPherson 19-21). Used by the Iroquois to make pillows and to place under children so they did not wet the bed. Also used by the Iroquois medicinally for many ailments such as arthritis, hair wash, for when hair fell out, used as a poultice for deep cuts, roots taken by women for fertility, used to treat venereal diseases, to give women strength after birthing, and for cramps and other menstrual complaints (Moerman 263).

Other Animal: Known to be toxic to horses.

### Why is it called *that*?:

*Onoclea* means closed-cup as referring to the sori being covered by the rolled up fronds and *sensibilis* means sensitive or irritable coming from the sensitivity of the leaves to frost (Gledhill).

Prepared by: Elizabeth LaRue April 2008