Gardening in the Shade

Presented by

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Types of Shade

First and foremost, all shade is not created equal. Areas with partial shade allow for a broad range of interesting and colorful plants, while deep shade, particularly dry, deep shade, such as that found under massive oak or pine trees, severely limits the number of plants that will thrive. Understanding the type of shade you have and choosing plants for those particular light requirements is the single most important element of a successful shade garden.

Dappled Shade is created by a light canopy of tree foliage, a pergola, or a lath roof. A moving pattern of sunlight and shade across the ground provides direct sun for one or two hours a day, and the area receives bright, indirect light during the rest of the day. A wide range of plants from sun-loving to shade-loving, including woodland plants, will thrive in dappled shade. Not all trees produce dappled shade; evergreens and trees with dense foliage create deep shade.

Light Shade (also referred to as filtered shade) is often referred to as open shade (receives 2-3 hours of shade daily), because the area is open to the sky, but walls, hedges, or other structures block direct sunlight. Even though there is no direct sun, the area still receives plenty of reflected bright light. Many plants will thrive in light shade, including vines and climbers that can be used to cover stark, unattractive walls and privacy fences. The soil in these spaces tends to be dry, as much of the rainfall is blocked by the structures.

Medium Shade (also referred to as half-shade or semi-shade) is defined as an area that receives 4-5 hours of shade a day. Many plants that prefer full sun will perform well in partial shade.

Full Shade is an area where there is no direct sunlight at all during the day, although there is indirect or reflected sunlight available to plants.

Deep or Dark Shade can be defined as an area that receives no direct sun, and has low light intensity throughout most of the day. These types of conditions can be found under an evergreen or in a recessed entryway. Although the number of plants that will grow in deep shade is small, a few will actually thrive in it.

Shady areas along streams, ponds, or well-watered flowerbeds are **Moist Shade** areas. Shade loving plants that require consistently moist soil, such as maidenhair and cinnamon ferns, trillium, bluebells, and forget-me-nots, will thrive in these areas.

Dry Shade, such as the kind found under oak trees, presents the biggest challenge for the shade gardener, as few plants tolerate both shade and dry soil. The trees rob most of the nutrients and water from surrounding plants, and their complex root systems make soil amendment difficult.

Determining Shade Conditions

It is important to give plants their necessary levels of shade. Some plants thrive in shade, while others will not. Taking the time to observe your planting area can give you much information on the types of plants that will work in your garden.

Before you plant, observe the prospective planting sites for one full week. Take notice of the areas that receive the most light, little light and the areas which are in full shade. This will help you determine which plants and flowers are suitable for your shade gardens.

Creating Shade with Trees

If you have a full sun area, the only way to create shade is by planting trees. If you have a small area, choose small trees such as the Dogwood, Cherry, or Apple. Shade can be added to large areas by planting White Birch, Weeping Willow or Evergreens.

Be mindful of where you plant your trees when creating shade. Carefully consider your site, not only today, but twenty years from now. Will the tree you are planting four feet from your house today be a suitable and safe location years down the road when it is fully grown?

Shade Trees Can Reduce Your Electric Bill

Trees are great energy savers. Planting trees in strategic places around your home can save you money on your electric bill. Trees create a cooling effect by the evaporation they put off, as well as from the shade they create. Shade trees can reduce the air temperature around your home by up to five degrees.

In regions where the need for air conditioning is relatively small, having trees on your property can virtually do away with electric cooling.

Reducing Shade

It is possible to reduce deep shade to dappled shade under trees and large shrubs by pruning. Thinning out branches opens up the canopy, allowing more light to reach the ground and increasing air circulation.

Just as you would with roses, start by removing dead or diseased branches first. Then prune those that grow toward the center of the tree or shrub, rather than outward. Continue pruning selectively, until you achieve the desired amount of shade.

Never prune more than one-third of the branches in one year. Try to remove small branches rather than major limbs. Removing the lowest branches will raise the tree's canopy and permit more direct sun to reach the ground.

Wildflowers Complete Shade Gardens

Nothing completes a shade garden more than having a few patches of wildflowers.

Wildflowers that grow well in shade include: ageratum-wild, columbines, asters, coral bells and cardinal flowers. You can also use obedient plant, wild petunia, and spiderworts.

Hostas Are a Staple of Shade Gardens

Hostas do exceptionally well in shade gardens because they love rich soil. Hostas are very sturdy plants that can be planted in a single clump or used as ground cover.

The great thing about Hostas is they can easily be divided without jeopardizing the health of the plant. Once planted, Hostas do not require much attention.

Evergreens and Dappled Shade

Broadleaf evergreens are excellent choices for a garden that is prone to dappled shade. Rhododendrons, Mountain Laurel, and Evergreen Azaleas are popular choices for shade gardens. Holly and Viburnum also work well in a shade garden.

Ground Covers for Shade Gardens

The following ground covers work well in shade gardens: Carpet Bugleweed, Wood Anemone, Hostas, Lily of the Valley, English Ivy and Wild Sweet William.

One thing you should keep in mind when choosing a ground cover is the size of the plant's leaves. Larger and broader leaves will help to cut out weed growth.

Japanese Maples Can Accent a Shade Gardens

Japanese Maples can make a beautiful addition to a shade garden. With their graceful branches and gorgeous foliage, they are the perfect focal point for a shade garden. Japanese Maples are known for their brilliant fall color.

Keep in mind that the degree and intensity of your tree's color will be a direct result of having proper soil conditions, the right temperatures (warm days and cool nights) and whether or not the tree is in an area that drains properly.

Suggested Perennial Shade Garden Plants

Finding plants that thrive in partial to full shade can be a challenge. Listed here are several plants that have interesting foliage and colorful blooms throughout the season.

1. The following lists of perennials are grouped by height and color. Bloom color is also stated for each plant. Perennials are an excellent choice for the shade garden. They are both beautiful and economical. Plant once and enjoy!

2. Plants that reach a height of 24" to 36" should be reserved for the back of the border, such as:
   Ferns - up to 36", nice green foliage
   Bee Balm - 36" to 42", red flowers that are attractive to hummingbirds
   Astilbes - 24" to 36", red/pink/white flowers
   Old Fashioned Bleeding Heart - 30" to 36", pink or white flowers
   Toad Lily - 24", interesting purple speckled flowers

3. The middle of the shade garden includes plants that reach 12" to 18". There are many varieties to choose from such as:
   Spanish Bluebells - 12" to 16", blue flowers
   Traditional Bluebells - 18", blue flowers
   Brunnera - 12", green and silver foliage/blue flowers
   Coral Bells - 10" to 12", interesting red leaves
   Lungwort - 12", pink/blue flowers
   Hellebore - 12" to 18" , variety of whites and pinks

4. Reserve shorter plants for the front of the shade garden, such as:
   Sedum Ground Cover - 6"
   Sweet Woodruff - 6" to 8", white
   Pachysandra - 6" to 8"
   English Ivy - 4" to 6"

Other Perennial Shade Plants

Astilbe *(Astilbe)*. Light to dense shade, zones 4-8.
Azaleas. Partial shade, zones various.
Barrenwort *(Epimedium)*. Light shade to dense shade, zones 5-9.
Bee Balm *(Monarda*). Partial shade to full sun, zones 3-9.
Bellflower *(Campanula)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 3-8.
Bethlehem Sage *(Pulmonaria saccharata)*. Light to dense shade, zones 4-8.
Blackberry Lily *(Belamcanda chinensis). Z*ones 5-9.
Bleeding Heart *(Dicentra)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 4-8.
Bugbane *(Cimicifuga).* Light shade, zones 3-8.
Cardinal Flower *(Lobelia cardinalis)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 3-9.

Carpet Bugleweed *(Ajuga reptans).* Partial to full shade, zones 4-9.
Columbine *(Aquilegia)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 3-9.
Common Periwinkle *(Vinca minor).* Light to full shade, zones 4-7.
Coral Bells *(Heuchera)*. Light shade, zones 3-8
Creeping Phlox *(Phlox adsurgens)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 4-8.
Daylily *(Hemerocallis)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 3-10.
Elephant's Ears *(Bergenia)*. Light to dense shade, zones 3-8.
English Ivy *(Hedera helix).* Partial shade to full sun, zones 3-9.
Evergreen Candytuft *(Iberis sempervirens).* Light shade to full sun, zones 5-9.
Cranesbill *(Geranium).* Light shade to full sun, zones 4-9.
Goatsbeard *(Aruncus dioicus)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 3-7.
Globeflower *(Trollius)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 5-8.
Golden Groundsel *(Ligularia dentata)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 4-8.
Hellebore *(Helleborus).* Light shade to full sun, zones 5-9.
Holly *(Ilex).* Partial shade to full sun, zones various.
Japanese Iris *(Iris ensata).* Light shade to full sun, zones 5-8.
Lady's Mantle *(Alchemilla mollis)*. Light shade, zones 2-9.
Leopard's Bane *(Doronicum cordatum)*. Light shade, zones 4-8.
Lilly of the Valley *(Convallaria majalis).* Full shade to full sun, zones 3-7.
Lungwort *(Pulmonaria saccharata).* Partial to full shade, zones 3-9.
Marsh Marigold *(Caltha palustris)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 3-7.
Meadowrue *(Thalictrum rochebrunianum)*. Light shade, zones 5-9.
Monkshood *(Aconitum fischeri).* Light shade to full sun, zones 2-9.
Mountain Laurel, *(Kalmia latifolia).* Deep shade to full sun, zones 3-8.
New England Asters (*Aster novae anglias*). Light shade to full sun, zones 4-9.
Obedient Plant *(Physostegia virginiana).* Light shade to full sun, zones 3-9.
Pachysandra. Partial to full shade, zone 5-9.
Plantain Lily *(Hosta)*. Light to dense shade, zones 3-8.
Primrose *(Primula).* Light shade, zones 4-8.
Purple Coneflower *(Echinacea purpurea)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 4-9.
Rhododendrons. Dappled shade, zones various.
Sedum Ground Cover. Light shade to full sun, zones 3-9.
Siberian Bugloss *(Brunnera macrophylla). Z*ones 3-9.
Solomon's Seal *(Polygonatum)*. Light to dense shade, zones 3-9.
Spiderworts *(Tradescantia andersoniana).* Partial shade to full sun, zones 3-9.
Sweet Woodruff *(Galium).* Light to dense shade, zones 3-9.
Toad Lily *(Tricyrtis hirta).* Partial to full shade, zones 5-9.
Trinity Flower *(Trillium)*. Light shade, zones 5-8.
Viburnum. Partial shade to full sun, zones 2-9.
Violet, Pansy *(Viola)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 4-9.
Virginia Bluebells *(Mertensia pulmonarioides)*. Light to dense shade, zones 3-7.
Wild Ageratum (*Conoclinium coelestinum).* Partial shade to full sun, zones 5-9.
Wild Petunia *(Ruellia humilis).* Partial shade to full sun, zones 4-8.
Wild Sweet William *(Phlox divaricata)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 4-8.
Windflower or Wood Anemone *(Anemone)*. Light shade to full sun, zones 3-8.