

Plants for Shade Gardens (published 5/18/2024)
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Looking out my window, our shady neighborhood is bursting with colorful blooming azaleas, irises, and blue and white woodland phlox. The dogwood and redbud trees just finished flowering. Rhododendrons are getting ready to bloom. Who says shade gardening is just green plants? Just look around you. So, how do I get my shade garden to burst with color?

“Right plant, right place.” We’ve all heard that phrase and know it remains true even in the shade. We waste our dreams, time, and money planting haphazardly. Much information is available in the links below for you to find just the right plant. Another place to get essential information is on the plant label. Read it carefully and keep it in your garden journal for future reference.

Trees, shrubs, larger plants, or structures in the garden all create shade. Full or deep shade is a site that gets less than 2 hours of sun per day. Partial shade can be defined as two to four hours of shade. Assess the movement of light on your garden. Do you have deep, full, partial, or dappled shade? Are the soil conditions dry, moist, or wet? Considering your shade and soil conditions will help you to select plants that will “thrive and not just survive”.

Many annuals will quickly fill your garden with color in the shade. Impatiens are easy to grow annuals you can find in a myriad of colors. Try *Ageratum*, *Begonia*, *Salvia*, and German chamomile.

Soils under shady conditions can be dry, moist, or even wet. Moist conditions result from trees shading the soil. The lack of sunlight leaves the area cooler and the soil moist from lack of evaporation. Many colorful perennials will be happy growing in shady moist conditions. *Astilbe* is a colorful, summer blooming perennial that will tolerate heavy shade and needs well drained soil. Black cohosh is a stately native with dark foliage and candelabra-shaped white blooms. It is deer and rabbit resistant. Perennial or hardy begonias prefer moist rich soil and bear draping pink blooms mid-summer through August. The underside of its heart-shaped green leaves is a deep red.

Serviceberry and sweet bay magnolia are small understory trees and great hosts for native pollinators. In April, serviceberries have white flowers and produce red to dark purple edible berries. The fragrant sweet bay magnolia blooms from May to June, prefers part shade and is tolerant of wet conditions.

Swamp rose blooms are pink in summer through early fall. Virginia sweetspire has a fragrant white bloom. Both shrubs grow in partial shade and wet conditions.

Some plants grow in both dry and moist conditions. Look for the American beautyberry and St. John’s wort, both native shrubs.

Dry shade can make it difficult for many plants to thrive. Heavy tree canopies are like umbrellas keeping the rain off the soil underneath. Many tree roots compete for water. Natives used in

those types of growing conditions are good plants to choose for dry shade. Planting in pots or hanging baskets will avoid competition from roots or soil issues and allow you to choose your light conditions. When planting under trees, avoid cutting or nicking roots. Also, avoid adding soil over roots as it may hamper oxygen supply to the roots.

Baptista or false indigo tolerates dry, shallow soil and sports blooms of blue, yellow, lavender, or white from May to June. *Epimedium* or barrenwort, is a ground cover. Tennessee's state wildflower, the passion flower, is a vine that blooms purple and likes dry soil.

One final note, there are many shade plants used for their foliage. But that doesn't necessarily mean green. There are many brightly colored and variegated foliage plants that deserve mention such as caladiums (bulbs), *Coleus* (annuals) and *Heuchera* or coral bells (perennials) with beautiful foliage in unusual colors, some of which are black reds, hot pinks, oranges, limes, chartreuse and whites. Coral bells also have flowers that add to their usefulness in a shade garden. Whatever you choose, remember, "right plant, right place" will fill the garden with color through-out the growing season.

We've talked about colorful plants for the shade suggesting annuals, perennials, shrubs, vines, and trees. Enjoy all the color in your shade garden this summer. Happy gardening!

Resources

"Understanding Plant Labels,"

<https://ffl.ifas.ufl.edu/resources/ffl-minute-radio/2020-archive/july-2020/reading-plant-labels/>

"Underplanting Trees – Respect the Roots," <https://extension.psu.edu/underplanting-trees-respect-the-roots>

"Gardening in the Shade – Different Light Levels," <https://extension.umn.edu/planting-and-growing-guides/gardening-shade#shade%3A-different-light-levels-1218963>

"Native Plants for Shade," <https://extension.umd.edu/resource/native-plants-shade/>

"Landscaping with Native Plants – East Tennessee," <https://tnvalleywildones.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Landscaping-with-Native-Plants.pdf>

"Perennials for Tennessee Landscapes," <https://uthort.tennessee.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/228/2023/11/W874-B.pdf>

"Plants for Tennessee Landscapes: Bulbs for the Garden," <https://uthort.tennessee.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/228/2023/11/D140.pdf>

"Annuals and Biennials for Tennessee Landscapes," <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/12/W874A.pdf>

“Trees, Shrubs, and Groundcovers Tolerant of Wet Sites,” <https://extension.psu.edu/trees-shrubs-and-groundcovers-tolerant-of-wet-sites>

“Shrubs for East Tennessee,” <https://eastern.tennessee.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/62/2020/02/MG-Day-Shrubs-Info.pdf>

“NC State Extension Plant Toolbox- Magnolia virginiana,” <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/magnolia-virginiana/>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.