

SHADE GARDENING



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The first task in planning a shade garden is to be aware of just how shady the area is. Take some time to observe the light pattern over the course of the day. Notice if and when (a.m. or p.m.) there is any direct sun. Morning sun is less intense than afternoon sun and many shade-loving plants can tolerate the morning light. Does the area receive any reflected light from a light-colored building? This may allow a narrow area between two buildings to receive more light than expected. If the shade is caused by trees, it's important to know what types of trees they are. The shade from a Norway maple is considerably denser than that cast by a locust tree.

Light shade, such as may be found under open, lacy trees, supports many plants: annuals such as salvia, impatiens, wax begonias, and coleus; perennials such as columbine, daylilies, bleeding heart, and astilbes; ground covers such as ajuga, vinca, and moneywort; evergreens like arborvitae, Taunton yew, and balsam fir; and a long list of shrubs including alpine currant, chokeberry, azalea, green barberry, cotoneaster, and forsythia.

Partial shade provides good incidental light but not much direct sun, such as shade on the north side of a house. Plants suited to this include such annuals and bulbs as caladium, tuberous begonias, and impatiens; perennials like bergenia, astilbe, hosta, and many ferns; ground covers including lily-of-the-valley, snow-on-the-mountain, and pachysandra; evergreens such as Canadian hemlock and dark green spreader yew; and shrubs like boxwood, dogwood, viburnum, coralberry, serviceberry, snowberry, euonymus, and Annabelle hydrangea.

Dense shade has a little reflected light but no direct sun at all. This would be like the north side of a house with additional trees which deepen the shade or like the shade under closely planted, heavily branched trees. Fewer plants do well here but hostas, ferns, euonymus, dogwood, yews, pachysandra and a few others will grow well.

Shade implies more than just a lack of sun. Shade caused by trees (especially shallow-rooted species such as maples and willows) means a great deal of competition for moisture and nutrients. Shade may, therefore, not always imply moisture. A large overhang on a house can also create a shady, yet dry environment.

The most pleasing results will be obtained by working with the situation you have. Certainly you can thin trees to moderate shade, provide extra water when needed or containerize flowers so that they can be moved into the sun for part of the day but less maintenance and better results will occur if you concentrate on using plants that will thrive in the given conditions. Mother Nature only bends so far!

When planting a shade garden, be generous with soil preparation. Incorporate organic matter, especially if root competition is a factor. Do not crowd shade plants. Air circulation is very important to prevent disease.

November, 2008

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