

Shade Gardening

In an area with an abundance of trees, one of the biggest challenges for gardeners is that with them comes shade. Generally, a partially shaded area is one that receives 3-6 hours of direct sunlight daily. Wet, dry and deep shades are the most common planting situations in our area.

We usually encounter wet shade in areas with poor drainage and edges of bogs, ponds or streams. Under conifers (i.e. Douglas Fir) and deciduous trees (i.e. maples) is where we most often encounter dry shade. In a dry shade situation, new plants must compete for water with the established trees. Deep (or full) shade is an area that receives less than 3 hours (and perhaps only dappled) direct or indirect sunlight daily. A garden bed on the north side of a house is considered deep shade.

Because the above-mentioned shade situations present particular challenges, choosing plants best suited to the situation results in smart gardening. Along with tips for success, below are lists of some plants that thrive in various shade situations.

WET SHADE

To assist with heavy soil plagued by poor drainage, always mix compost with the existing soil prior to planting. Products such as Turface also aid in improved aeration. The following are some plants suitable for wet shade:

Bulbs:

Muscari/Grape Hyacinth—grass-like green foliage, fragrant flowers of varying colors in spring, will naturalize if undisturbed

Crocus/Crocus—fine green foliage, varying colors patterns of flowers, bloom in spring or fall

Galanthus nivalis/Snowdrop—nodding white w/green accents flowers held above grass-like foliage in spring, will naturalize if left undisturbed

Narcissus ssp./Daffodil—narrow bright green foliage, flowers are usually shades of yellow, bloom in spring, can be used in borders or to naturalize

Groundcovers:

Soleirolia soleirolia/Baby's Tears—tiny foliage, spreads by creeping stems, vigorous

Pachysandra terminalis/Japanese Spurge—evergreen, spreads by shallow underground roots, clean-looking foliage

Houttuynia cordata 'Chameleon'/Chameleon Plant—splashes of cream, pink, yellow and red on heart-shaped foliage, tiny white flowers that resemble those of a dogwood, monitor growth—can be aggressive in very wet areas (spreads by underground stems), dormant in winter

Lamium/Dead Nettle—evergreen in mild climates, heart shaped foliage, vigorous growth

Vinca minor/Dwarf Periwinkle—evergreen, trailing, roots where arching stems touch the ground, star-like flowers in blue, white, mauve or deep purple

Perennials:

Acorus/Sweet Flag- evergreen grass-like

Astilbe/False Spirea—summer blooms of varying color with file-textured foliage, dormant in winter

Carex/Sedge—many are evergreen, foliage is soft looking and feeling

Filipendula/Meadowsweet—summer blooms held above coarsely divided foliage, dormant in winter

Juncus/Rush—tolerates standing water, grass-like appearance

Myosotis/Forget-Me-Not—spring blooms of blue, white or pink held above dark green foliage, can be used as groundcover, dormant in winter

Shade Gardening

Zantedeschia/Calla lily—shiny arrow-shaped foliage, white flowers, dormant in winter

Shrubs and Trees:

Clethera alnifolia/Summersweet—deciduous, fragrant spikes of white flowers late summer/early fall

Gaultheria shallon/Salal—evergreen, glossy, nearly round green foliage, white or pinkish bell-shaped flowers followed by edible berries, NATIVE

Cornus stolonifera/Redtwig Dogwood—deciduous, fast-growing, green or variegated foliage, brilliant red stems in winter, NATIVE

Acer circinatum/Vine Maple—deciduous, many-stemmed, multi-trunked large shrub/small tree, nearly round light green foliage that turns orange, yellow or scarlet in fall, NATIVE

Sequoia sempervirens/Coast Redwood—evergreen, fast-growing, feathery foliage, reddish-brown bark, pyramidal mature shape, NATIVE

DRY SHADE

Winter and early spring are optimal time frames to establish new plantings in dry shade, as it is at this time when such areas receive periods of moisture. New plants are thereby allowed to settle and develop a good root structure prior to entering into their growth stage. Likewise, if planting in the heat of summer, you will have the greatest success by providing regular water to newly planted areas. Products such as Turface worked into the soil at planting time can assist with water retention. The following are some plants suitable to dry shade:

Bulbs:

Crocus/Crocus—fine green foliage, varying colors patterns of flowers, bloom in spring or fall

Fritellaria imperialis/Crown Imperial—broad, glossy green foliage supports tall, sturdy stalk topped with red, orange or yellow bell-shaped flowers tufted with green leaves

Galanthus nivalis/Snowdrop—nodding white w/green accents flowers held above grass-like foliage in spring, will naturalize if left undisturbed

Narcissus./Daffodil—narrow bright green foliage, flowers are usually shades of yellow, bloom in spring, can be used in borders or to naturalize

Groundcovers:

Cyclamen hederifolium/Baby or Hardy Cyclamen—triangular to heart-shaped deep green marbled with silver, star-shaped fragrant flowers of white or pink in late summer/early autumn

Epimedium/Bishop's Hat—semi-evergreen to evergreen heart-shaped foliage, stalks of little flowers of white, pink, red or yellow in spring

Gaultheria shallon/Salal—evergreen, glossy, nearly round green foliage, white or pinkish bell-shaped flowers followed by edible berries, NATIVE

Mahonia repens/Creeping Oregon Grape—evergreen, blue-green foliage turns spectacular purple-bronze with cold weather, clusters of small flowers in mid to late spring followed by dark blue berries, NATIVE

Sarcococca/Sweet Box—evergreen, small, fragrant winter/early spring flowers

Perennials:

Alchamilla/Lady's Mantle—roundish lobed foliage of pale green, clusters of yellow flowers in summer

Bergenia/Pigsqueak—evergreen, rosette of bold, glossy foliage, pink or white flowers in spring

Helleborus/Hellebore—evergreen, long, leathery, leaflets, cup-shaped flowers of white, green, pinks, purples in winter through spring (note: they do NOT like being transplanted!)

Shade Gardening

Heuchera/Coral Bells—evergreen, roundish foliage with scalloped edges, available in a variety of colors (yellows & limes in particular appreciate and brighten a shady spot in the garden!), spikes of delicate flowers in spring or summer

Liriope/Lily Turf—evergreen, grass-like straps of green foliage, spikes of white or purple flowers in summer

Shrubs and Trees:

Acer circinatum/Vine Maple—deciduous, many-stemmed, multi-trunked large shrub/small tree, nearly round light green foliage that turns orange, yellow or scarlet in fall, NATIVE

Calocedrus deccurens/Incense Cedar—evergreen, large, pyramidal, flat sprays of rich green foliage, reddish-brown bark, lovely fragrance, NATIVE

Hydrangea queciifolia/Oakleaf Hydrangea—deciduous, large, deeply-lobed foliage that resembles (in shape) oak leaves, exquisite bronze to red autumn color, long clusters of white flowers in late spring/early summer,

Kalmia latifolia/Mountain Laurel—evergreen, leathery, oval, glossy green foliage, pink, white or red flowers in spring, slow-growing

Vaccinium ovatum/Evergreen Huckleberry—evergreen, shiny, toothed, dark green foliage tinged w/red when new, white or pink flowers followed by edible black berries in summer, NATIVE

Mahonia aquifolium/Oregon Grape—evergreen, glossy green leaflets that resemble (in shape) holly leaves, new growth tinged red and take on purplish color with cold, yellow flowers in spring followed by edible blue-black fruit in summer, NATIVE

DEEP OR FULL SHADE

In areas that receive little to no direct sun, or only minimal dappled sun soil also needs special consideration. As with soil in wet shade, the goal is to improve drainage to allow greater planting success. Adding compost to existing soil is a must in these areas. The following are some plants suitable to deep shade:

Bulbs:

Arum/Jack-in-the-Pulpit—foliage emerges in fall or winter and is green with white veins and arrow-shaped, calla-like “flowers” emerge after foliage and are followed by clusters of red berries that persist after foliage dies (actually a tuber)

Colchicum/Meadow Saffron or Autumn Crocus—broad green foliage in spring that die down in late summer/early autumn when flaring white, rose-purple or lavender-pink flowers bloom (actually a corm)

Groundcovers:

Cornus canadensis/Bunchberry—

Epimedium/Bishop's Hat—semi-evergreen to evergreen heart-shaped foliage, stalks of little flowers of white, pink, red or yellow in spring

Gaultheria procumbens/Winterberry—evergreen, small dark green foliage that clusters at the end of a stalk, strong wintergreen fragrance when bruised, pinkish flowers in spring followed by red berries that persist through winter

Pachysandra terminalis/Japanese Spurge—evergreen, spreads by shallow underground roots, clean-looking foliage

Sarcococca/Sweet Box—evergreen, small, fragrant winter/early spring flowers

Vinca minor/Dwarf Periwinkle—evergreen, trailing, roots where arching stems touch the ground, star-like flowers in blue, white, mauve or deep purple

Shade Gardening

Perennials:

Anemone/Wind Flower—clumped foliage gives rise to tall, graceful stems that are topped with single or semi-double white or pink flowers in early autumn

Brunnera macrophylla/False Forget-Me-Not, Brunnera—large, heart-shaped foliage of green or silver veined with green, dainty blue flowers rise above foliage spring into summer

Ferns—LARGE family of plants, deciduous, semi-evergreen or evergreen, vary greatly in size and look of foliage

Hosta/Plantain Lily—clumps of lance-shaped to nearly round foliage of many different colors and patterns, mature size varies greatly in this group, spikes of trumpet-like blue or white flowers in summer (some are fragrant)

Corydalis/Corydalis—clumps of finely lobed, fern-like foliage, clusters of spurred yellow, blue (many variations of blue) flowers spring into summer

Ophiopogon/Mondo Grass—evergreen, small, grass-like foliage of green or black, stems of small, clustered purple flowers in summer followed by black berries

Trillium/Wake Robin—multi-stemmed, low-growing woodland plant, each stem holds a whorl of 3 leaves topped by a 3-petaled flower in early spring, goes dormant in mid to late summer

Shrubs and Trees:

Acer circinatum/Vine Maple—deciduous, many-stemmed, multi-trunked large shrub/small tree, nearly round light green foliage that turns orange, yellow or scarlet in fall, NATIVE

Aucuba japonica/Japanese Aucuba—evergreen, smooth green or green splashed w/yellow foliage, sparkles in deep shade!

Fatsia japonica/Japanese Aralia—evergreen, large fan-like glossy dark green foliage, tropical looking

Kerria japonica/Kerria—deciduous, toothed and crinkled looking, triangular, bright green foliage, single or double rose-like small yellow flowers in spring

Tsuga/Hemlock—evergreen, horizontal needle-like sprays of foliage, graceful, large group of conifers that range in size and habit, NATIVE (Mountain and Western Hemlocks)