



Shade Gardening —

More than another pretty hosta!

Hostas are the first plants that come to mind when thinking about shade gardening. Hostas come in many sizes, colors, and patterns, requiring little care to thrive. There are other colorful and interesting plants, adding to the beauty of a shadier spot in your garden.

Understanding Shade

Before designing your shade garden, it's important to understand your site when selecting the right plants.

◇ **Not all shade is created equal.** The amount of available light varies on the site. Plants ability to withstand shade can vary. While it is often difficult to classify shade, these guidelines can help. Sometime you just need to experiment with the plant.

- **Dense shade** has no direct sunlight with little or no indirect or filtered light.
- **Full shade** is less than one hour of direct sun daily. This may include dappled or filtered light.
- **Partial shade** is less than 2 hours of direct sun, or shade at least half the day, usually in the afternoon.
- **Light shade** is 3 to 5 hours of direct sun and less than 4 hours of full shade.

◇ **Shade tends to be dry.** Trees tend to be the most common source of shade. A tree's canopy limits rainfall and the roots take up great amounts of water, outcompeting the plants. Supplemental irrigation will expand your plant palette providing needed moisture for growth. How much you water will depend on your gardening style. Consider irrigation issues when designing your shade garden.

◇ **Root competition can be a challenge.** Roots from trees can make gardening a challenge. Most gardeners value the trees and don't want to harm the trees shading the garden.

- Avoid bringing in soil. Adding soil around the base of trees can rot the bark layer and cause harm. Changing the grade even an inch can harm the tree.
- Avoid tilling the entire area when establishing a garden as it damages the roots causing rot and decay.

How to plant with roots—

- Plan your design around major roots.
- Dig generous sized planting holes. This allows time for the new plants to establish.
- Level uneven areas with compost. Compost does not smother roots like soil.
- Mulch with compost or natural mulch like wood chips or bark. A 2 to 3 inch layer is best.
- Water to maintain plant growth.
- Proper fertilization will help plants compete with roots.

Designing a Shade Garden

Shade tolerant plants tend to have less bold and bright colors. Flowers require more sunlight to develop, explaining why there are fewer flowering plants in shade gardens. Less color does not mean less interesting. Subtle and restful often describe shady gardens.

- **Texture:** Variations of large/small and fine/coarse foliage accentuate differences. This contrast creates interest in the design.
- **Form:** Columnar forms are accents, drawing attention. Rounded, weeping, or spreading shapes fill the area. Think about what the garden will look like in winter. These forms add year-round interest.
- **Foliage:** Glossy foliage reflects light and is more impactful than matte, dull, velvety leaves. A properly planned garden will have a mix of all types.

- **Variation:** Yellow-green foliage pops, whereas solid green or blue/green foliage isn't as showy.
- **Light colors:** White, cream, yellow, pink stand out. Concentrate on this color range for flowers and foliage for the showiest shade garden.
- **Deep colors:** Red, blues, purples tend to fade into the shade unless set off by contrasting light colors

What to plant?

Everyone is searching for the perfect plants for shade. As you see, all shade situations are a unique combination of light, soil, root competition, and moisture levels. Often, shade gardening is a trial and error to see if the plant will thrive in your setting. While not a complete list, here are some suggestions to add another dimension.

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Understory small trees

- Japanese Maple
- Redbud
- Flowering and Kousa Dogwoods
- Serviceberry
- Ironwood

Deciduous Shrubs

- Viburnum – Arrowwood, Burkwood, Cranberry, Korean Spice
- Bottlebrush Buckeye
- Witchhazel
- Kerria
- Fothergilla
- Oakleaf Hydrangea
- New Jersey Tea
- Redtwig Dogwood
- St. John's wort
- Smooth Hydrangea
- Itea
- Winterberry Holly

Evergreen Shrubs

- American Holly
- Boxwood
- Oregon Grape Holly
- Rhododendron/Azalea
- Yew
- Viburnum, Leatherleaf

Grasses

- Bottlebrush grass
- Hakone grass
- Sedge
- Juncus

Perennials

- Brunnera
- Epimedium
- Sweet Woodruff
- Wild Ginger
- Heuchera
- Astilbe
- Bergenia
- Bleeding Heart
- Chelone
- Lobelia—Cardinal and Blue
- Fern—Christmas, Ostrich, Painted Lady
- Geranium
- Lady's Mantle
- Tricyrtis
- Hosta
- Columbine
- Tiarella
- Solomon's Seal
- Helleborus
- Lady Bells (Adenophora)
- Mertensia Virginia Bluebells
- Anemone

Ground Covers

- Ajuga
- Pulmonaria
- Vinca minor
- English Ivy
- Pachysandra
- Lily of the Valley
- Liriope
- Plumbago

Annuals

- Ageratum
- Browallia
- Coleus
- Impatiens
- Lobelia
- Pansy
- Begonia
- Torenia

Source:

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