

# Shade Gardening

With Laura Altvater of Portland Nursery

Embrace shade! So many books and articles talk as if gardening in the shade is harder than gardening in the sun. Quite the contrary! Shade gardens often invoke serenity, relaxation, and a retreat from hot summer days. There is a huge diversity of plants to give the shade garden a full and vibrant feel that compares to the sun garden. In this class we will look at how forest structure can be used to design the shade garden, how to read the shade in your garden, dip into the plant pallet for shade and lastly look at some specific, challenging shade situations. So sit back, relax, and let's enjoy the shade.

## 1. **Forest Structure:** Learning from nature

**CANOPY:** Trees, tall conifers or even tall structures

**UNDERSTORY/MIDLAYER:** Small trees, dwarf conifers, shrubs, and tall perennials.

**GROUND LAYER:** Perennials, ferns, grasses, small shrubs, mini conifers, bulbs, and groundcovers.

## 2. **Shades of Shade:** Key points to assessing the degrees of shade.

Before determining plant selection, figure out the degree of shade in different parts of your garden by assessing the amount (how many hours) and intensity (time of day) of sunlight for each area. Sometimes this may take some trial and error to truly discover the correct interpretation. Also, one spot in the garden may suddenly receive direct sun at 1PM at the height of summer and be shaded the rest of the year.

**PART SUN/SHADE:** 1-5 hours of direct sun per day.

**Morning Sun:** direct sun in the garden for 1-5 hours before 1pm.

The ideal situation for most plants sold as shade plants. This setting is usually delineated by a structure or dense trees to the West and South which blocks the hot afternoon sun.

**Afternoon Sun:** 1-3 hours of sun after 1pm.

This type of part shade is a bit trickier. Many shade plants will burn with hot afternoon sun, and luckily many plants sold as sun plants can thrive in morning shade and perform better than shade plants. This setting is usually delineated by structures and/or trees to the east, west, or south.

**FILTERED SHADE/ DAPPLED SHADE:** this is like the light in the forest, the sun twinkles through the trees all day with no large pockets of direct sun.

Woodland plants are often best suited to this situation. Luckily there are woodlands all over the world, so the plant pallet has become quite diverse. This type of shade often has the added situation of tree roots which can compete for nutrients and water.

**DEEP SHADE:** less than 1 hour of sun all day.

A little trickier situation with a narrower plant palate. This type of shade is often delineated by dense trees and structures blocking out most of the sun. It commonly occurs between houses close together and patios and porches.

### 3. Characteristics of the Shade Plant Palate

The rhythm and plant pallet for the shade garden offer a different character than that of the sun garden. Foliage and plant structure often play the larger roles as opposed to flowers.

◆**Foliage color:** Everything from every shade of green to purple, gold and blue. Variegated foliage can also add the illusion of light to a shady area.

Gold foliage: *Acer shiraswanum* 'Aurea', *Choisy ternate* 'Sundance', *Fuchsia* 'Aurea', *Heuchera* 'Citronelle' or 'Lime Ricky', *Carex* 'Evergold', *Sedum* 'Ogon'

Purple foliage: *Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansey', *Acer palmatum* 'Red Pygmy', *Ligularia* 'Britt Marie Crawford', *Heuchera* 'Amethyst Mist', 'Obsidian', *Cornus canadensis*.

Blue Foliage: *Mahonia baelei*, *Fothergilla* g. 'Blue Mist', Blueberry 'Sunshine blue', Hostas, *Acena* 'Blue Haze

◆**Texture:** fine: Japanese Maples, Snowberry  
Dense: Camellia, Fatsia, Hosta,  
Feathery: Ferns

◆**Plant form:** Spiky: grasses, cast iron plant, ferns  
Round: Azalea, Hydrangea, dwarf conifers  
Flat: ground covers, dwarf hemlocks,  
Weeping: japanese maples, Leucothoe, Bleeding heart

◆**Flowers-**Many woodland flowers are often spring bloomers because they are taking advantage of the sun before the trees leaf out. Upon closer glance we can see the bloom season is all year with plants like Fuchsia, Impatiens and hydrangea for summer bloom, *Anemone* and *Trycirtis* for fall flowers and snowdrops and Hellebores for winter bloom.

### 4. Challenging Shade

When gardening in the shade, we come across many unique elements that can make the correct plant selection trickier. For example, house eaves and large trees can create dry shade. Heavy soil, down spouts, and low areas can foster wet shade. Tall buildings and dense conifers create deep shade. Now we will look at some strategies and possibilities for each of these situations.



**DRY SHADE:** In these areas, regular rainfall or irrigation is not available due to an obstruction, root competition or no access to irrigation.

Strategies:

1. Add Organic matter: Adding compost to the soil helps add nutrition and loosen clay soil or hold water in sandy soil.
  - a. Under trees add compost in pockets with minimal roots. **NEVER CUT BIG TREE ROOTS.** You can also top dress over roots with no more than 2” of compost. Also fertilize and hand water new plants (if possible) through the first season to help them establish.
2. Plant in Fall: The best time to plant is in fall after the first rains have begun. This allows plants to grow their roots all winter and spring when they will have the most rain.
3. Use containers under trees if roots are too dense.

Plant palate: Consult Tricky Shade brochure and dry shade article.

**WET SHADE:** In these areas the soil is perpetually moist which could be a result of natural water flow, low lying or sunken areas, or spots near down spouts.

Strategies:

1. Add organic matter- Adding compost (a ratio of half compost and half native soil) will help increase drainage. Also be sure to break up the chunks of soil as you are mixing in the compost.
2. Provide drainage for rain and run off. You can edge your beds with a trench and backfill with gravel to help create an exit route for excess water. This water will need a destination so you can direct it out of the garden, create a pond, or dry well.
3. Clean up fallen leaves in autumn so they do not retain too much moisture over the wet winter. If you mulch, go lightly: about 1”. Using compost as mulch can help increase drainage because it will attract worms to aerate the soil.
4. Plant selection is key. Not all shade plants like wet feet. Native forest plants that grow near streams will thrive. Additional options are given in the Tricky shade brochure, or Fine Gardening Design Ideas 2008.

**DEEP SHADE:** As defined earlier, deep shade occurs in areas that receive less than one hour of sunlight.

Strategies:

1. Use bright and variegated foliage or gazing balls and mirrors to create the illusion of light.
2. Remove lower limbs of trees or shrubs to help open an area to allow more light through or create planting pockets.
3. Plant palate includes large leaves and glossy evergreens. Refer to Tricky shade brochure..

With careful observation, good plant selection and plant layering we can all enlighten our shade garden and create a lush and relaxing retreat.

