Shade-loving Garden: A True Blessing

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A space for a retreat

Some of us may consider the shady part of our yard a problem spot. It is naturally dark, most of the time. Plants often look plain, and the space amounts to a mysterious gloom.

Don't despair! Focus on the positive! The best approach to solve a problem is to turn it into an opportunity.

Advantages
When given some forethought and care, a shaded place can easily become more carefree than its sunnier counterpart. This is because the site is more sheltered from weather elements, and the soil may not dry out as quickly.

When plants do not languish under the hot sun, they need less maintenance and have a better chance of staying aesthetically pleasing longer. After all, less sun brings fewer weeds. A landscape without shaded areas is incomplete and restless. We should, indeed, count our blessings for having a shaded space as a retreat.

To fine-tune a shade garden, we should understand which part of the garden gets how much sun (e.g., dappled sun or full shade), during what time of the day (morning, mid-day or afternoon), and in what season (for example, half-day sun in the summer and full shade in the winter). All shade is not created equal, so suitable solutions may differ for different situations.

Shade from Building Structures or Trees
The cause of the shade may be tall trees, building structures or fences. Even the terrain has some influence. A north-facing slope allows the building or trees to cast larger shadows and make the shade more pronounced and entrenched.

Shade caused by building structures may be easier to handle than a garden packed with tree roots. Depending on the orientation and height of the structures or trees, a portion of the garden may receive more sun in the middle of the summer than other times of the year; therefore, the shade may be seasonal. Some shade-loving plants would be scorched during the sunnier months, especially when subjected to reflective heat from pavement and siding.

Shade-loving plants are those requiring fewer than six hours of direct sunlight during the growing season to perform well. A common lawn, unless planted with more shade-tolerant *fescue* grass, would not do well even in dappled shade. Converting it to a natural, shade-loving garden may reduce maintenance.

A shade-loving garden under tall trees, featuring Astilbe, Siberian Bugloss, Japanese Aralia, Fuchsia, Japanese Forest Grass , Hydrangea, Leucothoe, and Sword Fern. *Photo by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Left: Skimmia is an evergreen shrub often used in shade gardens. **Right:** Annual flowers may be used to fill the shade garden, such as Impatiens (foreground), Coleus (background), and Fuchsia (right). *Photos by Everett Chu / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Trees and tall shrubs in the garden naturally result in shady spots. As they grow, the amount of shade they cast increases, often beyond the limits that some plants underneath or nearby can tolerate.

The dry shade under mature trees poses one of the biggest challenges in gardening, when sunlight, moisture and nutrients are taken away at the same time. In mature landscapes, it is not unusual to see plants under a tree canopy gradually die out, leaving the areas beneath looking empty. This is a source of frustration for many gardeners.

Although it is the result of Mother Nature's forest-making process, the empty space under the tree canopies can be filled to some degree with new plantings if necessary. To allow new plants to adapt and prosper in such dry shade, select only suitable plants, create planting pockets in the ground for sufficient root growth and nurture the plants for several years until they establish. To prevent undermining the health of existing trees, avoid scuffing their roots or piling a thick layer of new soil above the roots.

Planting Selections
To brighten the shade, we could incorporate flowers and lighter foliage colors (such as chartreuse and variegation). Design principles of layering, sequencing and color/texture contrasts should apply.

Most native plants are well-adapted to shade conditions, whether dry or moist, and have a better chance for success.

The following are partial lists of plants suitable for a shade-loving garden. Those marked with an asterisk (*) can be planted in deep shade.

<u>**Trees**</u>
- *Acer circinatum* (vine maple)*
- *Acer palmatum* (Japanese maple)
- *Amelanchier alnifolia* (western serviceberry)
- *Arbutus unedo* (strawberry tree)
- *Cercis Canadensis* (eastern redbud)
- *Cornus* (dogwood)
- *Parrotia persica* (Persian parrotia)
- *Podocarpus* (mountain plum pine)
- *Stewartia* (stewartia)

<u>**Vines**</u>
- *Schizophragma hydrangeoides* (Japanese climbing hydrangea)*
- *Trachelospernum jasminoides* (star jasmine)

<u>**Shrubs**</u>
- *Abelia x grandiflora* (glossy abelia)
- *Abutilon* (glowering maple)
- *Aucuba japonica* (Japanese aucuba)*
- *Azara microphylla* (box-leaf azara)

<u>Shrubs</u> (continued)

- *Buxus sempervirens* (boxwood)*
- *Camellia japonica* and *sasanqua* (camellia)*
- *Clethra alnifolia* (summersweet)
- *Cornus* (dogwood)
- *Corylus cornuta* (beaked hazelnut)
- *Daphne odora* (winter daphne)
- *Elaeagnus pungens* (silverberry)*
- *Enkianthus campanulatus*
- *Euonymus fortunei* (wintercreeper)*
- *Fatsia japonica* (Japanese aralia)*
- *Fuchsia*
- *Gardenia*
- *Gaultheria shallon* (salal)*
- *Hamamelis* (witch hazel)
- *Holodiscus discolor* (ocean spray)
- *Hydrangea*
- *Hypericum calycinum* (St. John's wort)*
- *Ilex crenata* (Japanese holly)
- *Kalmia latifolia* (mountain laurel)
- *Leucothoe fontanesiana* (drooping fetterbush)
- *Ligustrum vulgare* (common privet)
- *Lonicera involucrata* (black twinberry)*
- *Lonicera nitida* (boxleaf honeysuckle)
- *Mahonia aquifolium* (Oregon grape)*
- *Nandina domestica* (heavenly namboo)
- *Oemleria cerasiformis* (Indian plum)*
- *Osmanthus*
- *Physocarpus capitatus* (Pacific ninebark)*
- *Pieris japonica* (lily of the valley shrub)*
- *Pittosporum tobira* (pittosporum, Japanese mock orange)
- *Prunus laurocerasus* (English laurel)
- *Rhamnus* (buckthorn)
- *Rhododendron*
- *Ribes sanguineum* (flowering currant)
- *Rubus parviflorus* (thimbleberry)*
- *Rubus spectabilis* (salmonberry)*
- *Sarcococca* (sweet box)*
- *Salix integra (*dappled Japanese willow)
- *Skimmia japonica* (skimmia)*
- *Symphoricarpos* (snowberry)*
- *Vaccinium ovatum* (evergreen huckleberry)*
- *Viburnum davidii* (David viburnum)*
- *Viburnum rhytidophyllum* (leather-leaf viburnum)
- *Viburnum tinus* (laurustinus)
- *Viburnum x burkwoodii* (burkwood viburnum)

Perennials,, Bulbs, and Annuals

- *Acanthus mollis* (bear's breech)*
- *Actaea simplex* (bugbane, cimicifuga)*
- *Ajuga* (carpet bugle)*
- *Alchemilla* (lady's mantle)
- *Anemone* (wind flower)
- *Aquilegia* (columbine))
- *Aruncus* (goat's beard)*
- *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* (kinnikinnick)*
- *Asarum* (wild ginger)*
- *Aspidistra elatior* (cast-iron plant)*
- *Astilbe* (false spiraea)*
- *Astrantia* (masterwort)
- *Bergenia cordifolia* (bergenia)*
- *Brunnera macrophylla* (Siberian bugloss)*
- *Convallaria majalis* (lily of the valley)*
- *Corydalis*
- *Cyclamen*
- *Dicentra* (bleeding heart)*
- *Digitalis* (foxglove)
- *Doronicum* (leopard's bane)
- *Epimedium* (barrenwort)*
- *Farfugium japonicum* (leopard plant)*
- *Galium odoratum* (sweet woodruff)
- *Gentiana* (gentian)
- *Hakonechloa macra* (Japanese forest grass)
- *Helleborus* (hellebore)*
- *Heuchera* (coral bells)
- *Hosta*
- *Hyacinthoides* (bluebell)
- *Ligularia* (leopard plant)
- *Liriope* (lily turf)
- *Lobelia* (cardinal flower)
- *Mimulus cardinalis* (monkey flower)
- *Pachysandra*
- *Polemonium* (Jacob's ladder)
- *Polygonatum* (Solomon's seal)*
- *Polystichum munitum* (western sword fern)*
- *Primula* (primrose)*
- *Pulmonaria* (lungwort)*
- *Saxifraga* (saxifrage)
- *Solenostemon scutellarioides* (coleus)*
- *Thalictrum* (meadow rue)
- *Tiarella* (foam flower)*
- *Tolmiea* menziesii (piggyback plant)*
- *Tradescantia* virginiana (spiderwort)*
- *Tricyrtis* (toad lily)*
- *Trillium* *
- *Trollius* (globeflower)
- *Vancouveria hexandra* (inside-out glower)*
- *Vinca* (periwinkle)*
- *Viola* (biolet, pansy)*

RESOURCES:

- ***Shade: Ideas and Inspiration for Shady Gardens***. Keith Wiley. Timber Press. 2007.

- ***The self-sustaining Garden: the Guide to Matrix Planting.*** Peter Thompson. Timber Press. 2007.

- ***What Plant Where: The Creative Guide to Choosing the Best Plants for Every Area of Your Garden***. Roy Lancaster. DK Publishing. 1997.