

# Shade gardening does not have to be boring

By Melinda Myers

A shady spot provides welcome relief from the summer heat; but it can make growing a beautiful garden a bit more challenging. Take heart, your landscape may receive more sunlight than you suspect and if not, there are quite a few shade-tolerant plants you can grow.

Evaluating the sun and shade patterns throughout the day, season, and year is a good place to start. Sun-loving bulbs need lots of sun early in the season before most trees leaf out, while other plants need sunlight throughout the growing season. If you work all day, you may assume those shady spots in the morning and evening never light up, so take some time to evaluate the sun and shade conditions throughout the season.



Utilize a variety of shade-tolerant plants in shade gardens to add beauty and interest to the landscape. Photo/Melinda Myers

Make a list of plants that you have had success with and those that failed in the shady location. Use these to help you select or avoid plants with similar light requirements. For

example, if peonies bloom and tomatoes produce fruit this area receives quite a bit of sunlight, perhaps more than you thought.

If your landscape is too shady to grow the plants you desire, try increasing the sunlight reaching ground level plantings. Hire a certified arborist to thin the overhead tree canopy. They have the training and experience to do the job safely and correctly. You don't want to damage the health and structure of established trees, so critical to the beauty of your landscape.

If there's too much shade to grow even shade-loving plants, consider mulch to keep the mud in place, permeable pavers and a table or chair for relaxing, or a few steppers and moss to create a moss garden.

Once you've made your selections and planted your garden, you need to adjust the care to compensate for the limited light conditions. Plants growing under large trees or overhangs need to be watered more often, especially the first year or two until they become established. The dense canopy of many trees and impervious overhangs prevent rainfall from reaching the ground below. Plus, the extensive root systems of trees and shrubs absorb much of the rainfall that does make it through, so check soil moisture several times a week and water thoroughly as needed.

Tree and shrub roots can also compete with plantings for nutrients. Use a low nitrogen, slow release fertilizer like that promotes steady above and below ground growth. The 85 percent organic material further helps improve the soil. Apply slow release fertilizers at planting and once again for annuals mid-season. Fertilize new and established perennials in early spring and again in mid-summer as needed.

Avoid high nitrogen, quick release fertilizers that promote lush succulent growth that is more susceptible to insects and

diseases. And with limited light as a potential plant stressor, this can increase the risk of problems.

When planting under or near trees be careful not to kill them when creating your shade garden. Adding as little as an inch of soil over the roots can kill some tree species. And deep cultivation can damage the feeder roots critical for water and nutrient absorption since the majority grow within the top 12 inches of soil.

Here is a list of just a few shade-tolerant perennials to consider:

### **Woodland Wildflowers**

#### **Spring Flowering Bulbs**

Grape hyacinths

Checkered lilies

Camassia

Daffodils

Virginia Bluebells

#### **Perennial Flowers**

Ajuga

Astilbe

Barrenwort (Epimedium)

Bleeding Heart

Bugbane/Snakeroot (Actaea)

Columbine

Coral Bells

Deadnettle (Lamium)

Ferns

Foam flower (Tiarella)

Ginger (Asarum)

Hostas

Japanese Forest Grass (Hakonechloa)

Lungwort

Sedges

Siberian Bugloss (Brunnera)

Variegated Solomon Seal

Toadlily (Tricyrtis).

As always make sure the plants also tolerate your region's climate. And once you start reviewing the internet and plant catalogues you may find it difficult to narrow down your choices to fit in your new shade garden.

*Melinda Myers has written more than 20 books, including "Small Space Gardening" and "The Midwest Gardener's Handbook." She hosts the Great Courses "How to Grow Anything" DVD series and the nationally syndicated "Melinda's Garden Moment TV and radio segments.*