

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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A question often asked of WSU Master Gardeners is, "What can I plant in my shady garden?" If you have a place in your yard that is shaded by big trees, high fences or building walls there are several options you can consider. The number of hours of shade versus sunshine that is present will determine the kinds of plants you choose. Sun loving plants need at least six hours of strong light but the list of plants that will do perfectly fine with less sunlight is a long one.

Dense shade, caused by structures or large evergreen trees, is probably the most difficult area in which to garden. Plants with broad, evergreen leaves do well in low light, as they are very efficient at collecting the light they need. A good example is Mahonia or Oregon grape, which is tolerant of shade and blooms bright yellow in the spring, brightening dark corners. Gaultheria procumbens, wintergreen, is a native of eastern North America that adapts to our climate and our own native Gaultheria, or salal, is an excellent choice. Some rhododendrons will tolerate more shade than others. They may grow a little leggy and will need occasional pruning. Their showy blooms will also light up dim corners. Another broadleaf evergreen to consider is the Japanese aucuba. The variegated variety has yellow markings on its leaves.

Dappled shade is made by a canopy of deciduous trees. Many flowering shrubs do well under these conditions. Rhododendron, azalea, hydrangea, and witch hazel are naturals here. Spring blooming bulbs do fine under deciduous trees because they are usually through blooming before the trees leaf out. Plants such as hosta, hellebore, coral bells, cranesbill (or hardy geranium), impatiens, lily of the valley, Solomon's seal, primrose, plus fern, and Japanese maple all thrive in dappled or partial shade. The list goes on and on. Check out the nurseries for shade tolerant plants or use the list in the front of the Sunset Western Garden Book, entitled "Plants for Shade".

Most of the plants that I have mentioned so far are early spring bloomers. To get some summer interest into your shade garden you might plant glossy abelia, Abelia grandiflora. It produces a profusion of pink-tinged white blossoms all summer through fall. Frost can turn the evergreen leaves reddish green. In addition to the big leaf hydrangea try the wild hydrangea, H. arborescens, also called the smooth hydrangea.

It is an eastern native that adapts to our climate. Another shrub that thrives in partial shade is the beautyberry, Callicarpa dichotomea. It produces tiny pink inconspicuous flowers along arching branches through July and August but its real beauty comes in the form of little purple berries that appear in the fall and last into winter.

When dealing with your shade garden take a page from Mother Nature's book. Look at how plants grow in the forest. How the layers of plant growth blend with one another and try to duplicate it. One thing to remember about planting in the shade is that these areas can often be arid, especially if large trees are present. Watering deeply and frequently is vital as the large trees act as an umbrella and the soil under them can stay dry all year. In addition, their roots compete for available water.

Another possibility in very dense shade, where you have not had success getting plants to grow, is to use garden art or hardscape to create some interest. A birdbath works well in the shade. The birds appreciate the cool water on a hot summer day. If you can create a water-feature that makes a gurgling sound like a tiny waterfall, the birds will flock to it. A silver gazing ball will create some interesting reflected light. Add a comfortable garden bench. Most gardeners I know love a quiet place to rest and reflect.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.