

# Shade Garden Bloomers

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You can transform that shady spot into a cutting garden. Here's how.

Imagine a vase overflowing with sumptuous flowers, soft green textures and sweet smells. A year-round supply of flowers and greenery for arrangements is one of the most delightful rewards for garden toil. So what do you do if your garden is drowning in shade—a common challenge for Skagit County gardeners?

While it might not be what instantly comes to mind when you think of a cutting garden, the shady areas around your house and under your trees easily can rival full-sun environments for growing cut flowers. By choosing the right shrubs, perennials and annuals, you can create a beautiful oasis that provides year-round floral arrangement resources.

## Designing a shady cutting garden

A successful shaded cutting garden begins with an evaluation of your site. Shade comes in several varieties and plants have differing needs for soil quality and moisture. When you select plants, you'll want to choose those with environmental needs that are a good match to your site. Master Gardeners call this "right plant, right place." By analyzing your site you will identify the specific criteria for selecting plants.

## Types of shade

Determine the type of shade you have. A site with two hours of morning sun followed by dappled shade is very different from one with deep shade all day long. Observe your site several times over the course of a day; you may be surprised to find that your "full-shade" site actually has two hours of hot afternoon sun.

Here are several of the more common types of shade:

**Dappled shade:** spotted with sunlight, sun directly touches each leaf for about an hour, typically found in woodland settings.

**Bright shade:** no direct sun, but brightly lit; for example, a white, north-facing building wall.

**High shade:** a wooded setting where low tree limbs have been removed to raise the canopy.

**Dense shade/full shade:** under heavily branched trees or in an enclosed spot, such as between two houses.

**Part shade:** full sun for part of the day, usually fewer than five hours of sun; can make a big difference if sun is in cool morning or hot afternoon.

## Soil and moisture

Most plants that prefer or accept shade are found in wooded environments. Because of this, they are adapted to soil that is rich in organic material created by falling leaves and other plant remains. Amending your soil with compost or humus will prepare it for strong, healthy plants.

Tree roots often are a problem in shady spots. If you can't dig down more than a couple inches without running into roots, you will need to modify how you approach soil enrichment. Adding organic material to your soil will increase the depth of soil above the tree roots, which is detrimental to the tree's health. You can add an inch or two of organic material, but you will need to add "thrives amongst tree roots" to your list of plant selection criteria.

Like all plants, shade-lovers have varying needs for moisture. Plant selection is based on whether you have dry shade, moist shade or even wet shade, such as that surrounding a pond. If you plant a plant that likes a soggy home in a site with dry shade, the plant will not thrive. Thinking you can surmount this problem with extra watering is not a good strategy; there's a reason this site is dry (tree roots absorbing moisture, heat bouncing off a nearby wall) and trying to alter reality by extra watering is rarely effective. To ensure a successful garden and a happy gardener, select plants that match your site's native moisture level.



**WSU Skagit County Master Gardener Kathleen Olson takes full advantage of the shady parts of her yard by planting colorful blooming plants that are perfect for bouquets.** Photo by Kim Olson.

## Garden use

Knowing that you want plants that provide cut flowers and greenery along with good looks in the garden will affect your plant choices. For example, impatiens flowers are colorful in the garden, but aren't suitable for cutting and display. And consider selecting plants with varying bloom times and year-round interest, such as berries, bark or leaf color.

## Colors and textures

For gardeners who love color, shade's influence offers interesting opportunities. Combinations that would look glaringly bold in a sunny site can be beautiful in shade. Try a garden made up of complementary colors—those across from each other on the color wheel—such as orange and blue, or violet and yellow. These combinations can make a shady site pop with interest. Banish the feeling of coolness inherent in a shady site by selecting plants for a hot color garden: red, magenta, orange and yellow. Or visually cool the site further with a cool colored plant selection: purple, blue and white. Speaking of white, an all-white shade garden is magical, especially in moonlight.

When selecting plants be sure to consider texture and shape. Some gardeners find that shade enhances textures. Experiment for yourself by seeking out plants with leaves that are smooth, fuzzy, bumpy, lacy or shiny. Select a variety of foliage colors, from deep green through chartreuse and beyond to variegated and colored leaves. These will add significantly to the garden's beauty, and will give you lots of options for display. In fact, some of the most admired floral designers are making arrangements of greenery, seed pods, berries and vines—with no flowers at all!

**Blooming plants for shade**

To get started creating your own blooming shade garden, consider these choices.

*For light shade and dappled shade:*

Shrubs

- Azalea
- Camellia
- Daphne odora
- Hydrangea
- Inkberry
- Japanese pieris
- Mountain laurel
- Rhododendron
- Viburnum

Vines

- Clematis
- Honeysuckle
- Morning glory

Annuals

- Lobelia
- Pansy
- Pericallis

Bulbs

- Allium
- Daffodil
- Hyacinth
- Lily
- Tulip



**This *Hydrangea macrophylla* lends color best to light or dappled shade.** Photo by Kathleen Olson.

Perennials

- Alstroemeria
- Bugbane
- Columbine
- Cimicifuga/bugbane
- Daylily
- Feverfew
- Foxglove
- Hardy gardenia
- Japanese anemone
- Lady's mantle
- Lavatera
- Lily of the Valley
- Oriental poppy
- Primrose



**This shade-loving lady's mantle, front, blooms with chartreuse flowers. A hosta of unknown variety backs it up.** Photo by Kathleen Olson.



*For deep shade:*

Shrubs

Forsythia  
Sarcococca

Perennials

Astilbe  
Bleeding heart  
Epimedium  
Goat's beard  
Hardy fuschia  
Hellebore  
Hosta  
Ligularia  
Solomon's seal  
Toad lily  
Viola

Annuals

Coleus (leaf color)  
Fuchsia  
Tuberous begonia  
Spiderwort  
Siberian Iris  
Violet



**Honeysuckle (*Lonicera spp.*) needs very little sunlight to be happy. Keep an eye on it, though: It can be an aggressive spreader.**

Photo by Kathleen Olson.



**This cute bouquet is full of shade garden favorites: lady's mantle, two varieties of hosta leaves, hydrangea and cranesbill.**

Photo by Kathleen Olson.