

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Although I find my shade garden one of the most satisfying of my gardening experiences, I remember when I found shade an overwhelming challenge to growing a beautiful garden. My garden is located between a steep hill to the east and my three-story house to the west. To the north and south, tall cedars rise in dense groves that are almost impenetrable barriers to sunlight. My challenge was to create a pleasing space that I could enjoy every day of the year. Luckily, I received some good advice. The advice I received was to first determine the type of the shade in my garden, and second to select plants that naturally thrive in the conditions that existed in my garden.

The type of shade available varies since the sun moves through the sky all day long and in most cases, some sun is available for part of the day. Although, there are various categories assigned to shade, I like to simply make three. Dappled shade which means that the light is screened through other foliage all, or very nearly all, of the time and which is a perfect environment for most azaleas and rhododendrons. Medium shade which means that the sun is screened by a wall or a high canopy of trees throughout the hottest parts of the day but allowed through in cool morning or evening. Deep shade, perhaps the most challenging of shade alternatives, is usually created by walls or dense plantings tall enough to keep all direct sun away. Knowing the kind of shade that you intend to garden in helps in plant selection and in other decisions as well. There are gardeners that recommend that deep shade areas be landscaped (pavement, stepping stones etc) to save energy for the less challenging areas of the garden. A landscaped area with pots that are moved from time to time to gather sun is certainly one alternative. However, beautiful gardens can be created in deep shade areas.

For those of us who have to consider deep shade areas and want a garden there are two other conditions to consider. Water is the first. Most deeply shaded areas of the garden are relatively dry. This is because the elements that screen out the sun also keep the rain from reaching the ground. Potentially, shade gardens require a little more watering than open areas. The second condition is soil quality. Gardens around new construction and most areas right next to a building are likely to need the addition of rich loam. Hardpan is exposed and earth is compacted during construction. Good soil takes years to develop naturally and the simple addition of six inches of good soil will make the gardener's job more productive. Using a good compost or mulch after planting will help both conditions.

So, know your degree of shade, add soil if necessary, and consider the special needs for watering and mulching. Now you can select your plants. Here are some suggestions for plants that thrive in shade gardens in the Pacific Northwest. Trees to select are vine maple (*Acer circinatum*), Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum*), Dogwood (*Cornus*), Halesia and Stewartia. Shrubs include *Sarcococca humilis*, *Skimmia japonica*, *Taxus* (yew), *Ribes alpinum*, *Rhododendron vulcan*, *Camellia*, *Nandina domestica*, *Pieris* and *Acuba japonica*. Perennials that thrive in shade include *Astilbe chenensis* var. *Davidii*, tuberous begonias (of all kinds and colors), Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum*), *Anemone japonica*, *Gaultheria*, *Astilbe* x *arendsi* hybrid, *Heleborus orientalis*, *Impatiens waleriana*, *Dicentra purpurea* (Bleeding Heart), *Hosta* hybrids, *Galium odoratum* (sweet woodruff), *Bergenia crassifolia* and *Polygonatum* (Solomon's seal). Sweet woodruff is an amazing ground cover and hostas multiply each year with showy foliage and a mildly disappointing flower. There are many more, but these live and flourish in my shade garden.

When you visit your local nursery, ask to be directed to shade-loving plants. Also, a visit to the Master Gardener Clinics in Anacortes and Mount Vernon will answer a lot more of your questions and you can talk to other real shade gardening enthusiasts and ask for their recommendations.

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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 Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

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