

Plants for Shaded Gardens

By Valerie Rose
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Coping with a shady deal in your garden

Towering native evergreens grace much of the Pacific Northwest. Boughs of douglas firs and western red cedars turn the wind into music. Numerous creatures find shelter and food from the roots to the canopy. These majestic trees also bring strong vertical lines to the home landscape- and herein lies the challenge for many northwest gardeners.

The dense shade created by large evergreen trees, tall fences or buildings requires careful observation and creative solutions. First, determine which areas have at least some sunshine during the growing season. Remember, the angle of the sun changes throughout the seasons, so in summer the sun appears much farther north in the sky. Many of winter's shadows will dissolve in the (seemingly infrequent) sunlight of summer and autumn.

The number of hours of shade versus sunshine will determine the kinds of plants you choose. Sun loving plants need at least six hours of strong light, but fortunately there are many native and non-native plants that will do well with less sunlight.

Look to the Forest for Clues

Nature provides excellent examples of plants well adapted to life in the shade of evergreen forests. Look to plants with broad, evergreen leaves. They are very efficient at collecting the light they need. A good example is Mahonia or Oregon grape (*berberis nervosa*), a native plant found in the shade of northwest forests. In springtime, these shrubs' bright yellow blooms brighten dark corners.

Our state flower, the rhododendron, is a forest-dweller. This native rhododendron (*rhododendron macrophyllum*), has long been overshadowed by dazzling cultivars and varieties imported from Asia. Some of these rhodys can tolerate partial shade. Their showy blooms will brighten dim corners of the landscape. The gardener seeking an authentic native rhododendron will need to contact a nursery specializing in northwest natives.

Mountain heather (*phyllodoce empetriformis*) is another native evergreen shrub accustomed to thriving in shade. Planting blue huckleberry (*vaccinium deliciosum*) and grouseberry (*vaccinium scoparium*) allows you to enjoy the fruits of your gardening labors. Native groundcovers found in forest shade include vanilla leaf (*achlys triphylla*),

wild ginger (*Asarum caudatum* or *hartwegii*), bunchberry (*Cornus Canadensis*), twinflower (*Linnaea borealis*), false lily-of-the-valley (*Maianthemum dilatatum*), foam-flower (*Tiarella trifoliata*) and many others.

Many shady areas are moist, even boggy – but this is not a universal condition. False Solomon's seal (*Smilacina racemosa*) is a northwest native that does well in dry shade. It grows 1 to 3 feet tall, and is graced with clusters of cream color flowers in the spring. Most astilbids will tolerate partial shade, but *Astilbe chinensis* blooms late and can survive dry soil. Watering deeply and frequently is vital, as large trees act as an umbrella, keeping rain from the soil all year. Yes, I know this sounds impossible, but it does happen here in the land of (almost) perpetual moisture.



Left: Many varieties of hostas, hellebores and ferns thrive in dappled partial shade. (Photo by Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald) **Above Right:** Hostas are shade-loving plants (Photo from Wikipedia)

Plants for Dappled Shade

Deciduous trees are so well designed for landscaping around a home. Dropping their leaves in autumn allows sunlight to reach your windows – maybe not as often as you'd like, but a window shaded by an evergreen will not bring in even fleeting seasonal light. If properly sited, a deciduous tree's new leaf canopy will shade your house from the hot afternoon's sunshine in summer. (I know this seems irrelevant now, but you'll thank me in August.)

Dappled shade is made by the canopy of deciduous trees. Many flowering shrubs do well under these conditions, including varieties of rhododendron, azalea, hydrangea, and witch hazel. Spring-blooming bulbs do well beneath deciduous trees, as they usually flower before the trees leaf out. Many varieties of hostas, hellebores, and ferns all thrive in dappled or partial shade. Most varieties of impatiens will only thrive in the shade.

With their ancient majesty, huge trees are venerable, yet sometimes surprisingly vulnerable. The roots of some old trees are growing above ground. Never create new garden beds by piling soil on these exposed roots. Huge trees can be killed by the addition of as little as 10 inches of soil over exposed roots. Also, do not to scuff the roots with shovels or power trimmers.

“But Nothing Will Grow Here!”

Do you have an area of very dense shade, where you have not had success getting any plants to grow? This is a great opportunity to create or buy garden art. Aside from solar-powered lights or sculptures, you have the perfect place for a fun sculpture, a mirror, even furniture. Bright shades of paint on a chair or bench add year-round color to a shaded seating area. A silver gazing ball radiates reflected light and images. And a birdbath provides a welcoming site for birds seeking a drink or a quick wash-up.

Forget about growing tomatoes and squash in your shady areas. If you have a porch or deck that gets hours of sunlight, grow your veggies in containers, next to the house, and let shade-loving plants find a happy home beneath the trees.

RESOURCES

- “Shade Gardening,” WSU Clark County Extension:
http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/mg/gm_tips/ShadeGardening2.html
- New Sunset Western Garden Book, Sunset Publishing, Kathleen Norris Breznel, Ed.; 9th edition, 2012
- Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest, Arthur R. Kruckeberg, University of Washington Press; 2nd edition, 1996