

PLANTING IN DRY SHADE

A dry shady area is one of the most difficult settings in which to garden. If large trees, especially evergreens, tower over your garden shading everything and sucking up the water as fast as you can put it on, and if their canopy is so dense it catches the rain before it reaches the ground, then you have some very difficult obstacles to overcome. Now if the soil in your planting bed is sandy and porous and unable to hold moisture for very long the problem becomes even greater.

The good news is there are many plants that will tolerate these conditions and you will have more success if you use them in your problem garden. As you may have already found out, vegetables do not thrive under these conditions. The more sun the better for them. Lists of drought tolerant plants appear in gardening books and periodicals. Another source to look for planting ideas is Mother Nature herself. Many of the plants that grow in our western forestlands have to exist in just such conditions as these.

Here are some tips from the experts for gardening in dry shaded areas. Work two or three inches of compost into the soil before planting. This improves the water retention capabilities of the soil. If possible, irrigate even during the rainy season. The ground under large evergreen trees stays dry the year around. It is a good idea to space plants a little farther apart than usual and stake tall plants as they will grow towards the light. It is a good plan before planting to measure the amount and type of shade in your garden by timing the periods of sunlight and shade and select plants according to the type of shade you have; full, partial, or filtered. You can keep a shade map by checking the shade movement in your garden for an entire year.

If you are gardening under deciduous trees, conditions change dramatically as the trees leaf out in the spring or drop leaves in the fall. Once you have a good picture of the shade pattern in your garden you can start to select plants. Among the plants that will survive in dry shade is lily-of-the-valley, a creeping ground cover that blooms in early spring. Yellow archangel, is another creeping ground cover with white variegation on the leaves. It shows up nicely in dark corners, but it can be invasive. The false Solomon's seal is a northwest native that does well in dry shade. It grows 1 to 3 feet tall and has clusters of cream color flowers in the spring. Foxglove is a biennial that will grow, bloom and re-seed itself in most any condition. Most astilbies will tolerate partial shade, but Astilbe chinensis blooms late and can survive dry soil. Other drought-tolerant ground-hugging plants include Epimedium and Vancouveria hexandra. Ferns and mosses are possibilities to use in shaded areas.

These are just a few of the plants that will do well in dry shade, but remember they would all do even better if given more water. Check at your local nursery for more plants to use in difficult places in your garden. Also, visit the WSU Discovery Garden next to the Washington State University Research Unit in Mount Vernon. There is a small area in that garden devoted to shade-loving plants. However, drought is not a problem there.

A word of caution about planting around big trees whose roots may be exposed. Huge trees can be killed putting as little as 10 inches of soil over their roots and, also, take care not to scuff roots with shovels or power trimmers.

The information provided in this newsrelease is for education purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by Cooperative

Extension is implied. Cooperative Extension programs and employment are available to all without discrimination.

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, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.