

Planting In Dry Shade in the Pacific Northwest

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January 15, 2016



Strategies and plant choices

The state of Washington is often thought of as having a wet climate. This is not fully the case. Spanning a geographical area from the Pacific Ocean to the drier areas of eastern Washington, the climate varies greatly. Western Washington typically has mild, wet winters and dry summers. To some it's surprising, but commonly the Pacific Northwest experiences very little rainfall between June and September. The average annual rainfall measures about 40 inches.

Drought-tolerant plants for shade are a good choice for the Puget Sound gardener, and there are many to choose from. What is considered a drought tolerant plant? Horticulturists define them as "those that can successfully endure periods of limited moisture" (WSU EM087E). Certain woody plants are able to store water in their roots and trunks to survive dry periods. You can often distinguish drought-tolerant plant species by their thick, hairy or waxy leaves that slow down evaporation. Deciduous trees with deeply indented leaves reduce water loss. Certain grasses such as perennial ryegrass will go dormant during summer and revive with the autumn rainfall.

Planting successfully in dry, shady areas can be one of the most challenging goals for the home gardener. There are viable options and strategies though, so don't lose hope.

Hydrozones

Hydrozones are a proven gardening tactic used to reduce the need for additional water in the landscape. A hydrozone is a landscape area where plants with similar water needs are grouped together. The hydrozone can be small, medium or large in size.

Mulching

Consider using compost materials in the dry shade planting area. Mulches will reduce drying, minimize runoff and increase plant health (Chalker-Scott 1011). Compost materials include woody debris, yard debris, leaves, grass clippings, evergreen conifer needles, shredded bark, sand, stones and pebbles.

Watering

The goals of environmentally sound irrigation are to maximize water infiltration and minimize or eliminate runoff. Overwatering occurs when water is applied faster than it can be absorbed. To reduce runoff conditions we must reduce the need for supplemental water. Effective use of mulches, hardscaping and drought resistant plants will help achieve and maintain appropriate garden hydration. Too much water can wash away nutrients. Efficient watering will not only keep your water bill low, it will protect water quality and availability. To water more efficiently, avoid hand watering and use drip irrigation and timers. Hand watering is best used for container plantings and small beds located on level ground.



Mahonia adds a spot of color during winter and does well in dry shade. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Invasives in dry shade

Beware of invasive species. There are many varieties such as English ivy and lamium that thrive in dry shade and are commonly sold at gardening centers. Promised benefits include groundcover solutions; weed prevention; shade and drought tolerance. These characteristics may be true, but these plants also have invasive characteristics. In the state of Washington, they take over large areas and destroy native plant and wildlife habitats

Strategies for dry shade/semi shade

Consider these ideas to help the landscape withstand dry shade conditions:

- Work with a licensed, bonded landscape professional who is experienced in xeric design and hydrozone concepts.
- Avoid using invasive plant species.
- Before selecting plants, refer to websites such as USDA Natural Resources Conservation and Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board.
- Group plants with similar light, water and soil needs.
- Condition the soil. Incorporate compost to a depth of 6-8 inches and add top layer. Replenish regularly.
- Minimize/mitigate runoff.
- Minimize soil disturbance.

- For interest and drought endurance, use hardscape items such as rocks, stone pathways and yard art.
- Mimic nature. Observe adjacent areas and use similar (noninvasive) plant species that are known to withstand drought.
- Once plants are established, water longer and less frequently—and only as needed.

Plant choices for dry shade/semi shade

Trees

- Big leaf maple
- Bitter cherry
- Douglas fir
- Hemlock

Understory

- Serviceberry
- Vine maple
- Red maple (Red Sunset, October Glory, Northwood)
- Evergreen huckleberry
- Indian plum

Shrubs

- Salal
- Low and tall Oregon grape
- Twinberry
- Sword Fern

Groundcovers

- Salal
- Low Oregon grape
- Sword fern
- Oregon stonecrop

Grasses (at least 6 hours of sun daily)

- Perennial ryegrass (*Lolium perenne*)
- Tall fescue (*Festuca arundinacea*)

Plants and invasives to avoid

- English ivy, holly
- English laurel
- Morning glory
- Scotch broom
- Japanese knotweed
- Lamium (yellow archangel and others)
- Herb robert
- Purple loosestrife

RESOURCES:

- *The Pacific Northwest Gardener's Book of Lists*. Ray and Jan McNeilan. 1997.
- *The Informed Gardener*. Linda Chalker-Scott.

- <https://puyallup.wsu.edu/lcs/podcast/>
- Washington Native Plant Society <https://www.wnps.org/native-plant-directory>
 - WA Noxious Weed Control Board; www.nwcb.wa.gov
 - Going Native Brochure <https://your.kingcounty.gov/dnrp/library/2003/gonative.pdf>
 - www.Seattle.gov/util/directory/conservation
 - Natural Lawn Care <https://snohomishcountywa.gov/1097/Natural-Yard-Care>

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.