

## Color in The Shade



Mass planting of hostas

Having a vibrant, colorful garden in a shady spot can be a challenge. Many shade gardeners settle for green as the color, with brown tree trunks thrown in for good measure. Fortunately, that challenge can be met with a little inspiration and ingenuity. There are two words to explore when talking about color in the shade – you guessed it – shade and color. The first challenge in shade gardening is determining what kind of shade you have – not all shade is created equal! Your plant choices will depend on what kind of shade you have. Then we explore some colorful choices for each of those shade definitions – Hint: not always flowers, although there are plenty of flowers to brighten that shady spot.

The simplest definition divides shade into three categories: full shade (no direct sun and limited bright light), bright or open shade (not much direct sun, but open, bright light) and part shade (six hours of direct sun or less in summer). Full shade is the most challenging, and can exist under established evergreen trees or on the north side of a structure where the sun never directly shines.

Open or bright shade can be found under deciduous trees, which provide light under them in winter and early spring before the leaves come back, and can provide dappled sun through the branches in spring and summer. Spring blooming bulbs and ephemerals such as Trillium do well in these conditions. Evergreen trees can be limbed up to provide open, bright light under them. Providing the most light you can will enlarge your selection of plants. The second challenge with planting under trees is not the shade, but the greedy tree roots which deplete the soil of nutrients and water, often providing a poor environment for other plants. Amending the soil with organic matter and watering can help. Placing seasonal containers of beautiful, colorful plants under trees is a great solution to this situation.



Cornus kousa "Wolf Eyes"

Part shade can be on the west or east side of a structure or other obstruction (like a hill or a tree). The shade can exist in either the morning or afternoon, and the direct sun of morning or afternoon can be weaker or stronger, with consequent plant choice decisions to be made. Afternoon sun can often support plants that like full sun where shade requiring plants may wilt or burn.



Toad Lily

So, now that you have evaluated your shade situation, you are ready to choose some colorful plants to liven up that space. One of the goals of color in the shade is making focal points. Usually there is a lot of green or brown in a shady area, so bright, light colors show up well against that backdrop. Red, maroon, dark blue colors add notes of interest, but the real showstoppers are the bright colors that light up that dark corner. White and yellow are especially vibrant in a shady area. The color can be in the flowers or in the leaves of perennials or annuals or in shrubs or trees. When planning for the shade garden, consider bloom time, making sure you provide for interest in all seasons. Masses of the same or similar plants often provide wonderful, showstopping displays.

Some shade plants with colorful flowers or leaves to consider are:

*Impatiens* sp.: annual, blooms all summer until first frost, full to part shade, in a variety of jewel-like colors and white.

*Anemone* hybrids, windflower: perennial, part shade, blooms early spring. Flowers come in white, pink and blue varieties.

*Aruncus dioicus*, goatsbeard: perennial, Northwest native, full to part shade, white flowers in late spring to summer.

*Astilbe* hybrids, false spiraea: perennial, part shade, blooms summer. Airy foliage lasts all summer, comes in red and pink as well as white.

*Brunnera macrophylla* “Jack Frost” and “Hadspen Cream”, perennial forget-me-not: part shade, blue flowers in spring, white variegated foliage lasts all summer.

*Cardiocrinum giganteum*, Giant Himalayan lily: monocarpic (main plant dies after flowering, leaving offsets), part shade, the showstopper of all time when it blooms, giant fragrant white lily flowers in July on 10-12 foot stem, large hosta-like leaves.

*Cimicifuga racemosa*, Bugbane: perennial, part shade, white spikes of flowers in late summer. Variety “Black neglige” has maroon foliage that offsets the white flowers and stands out in a green setting.

*Dicentra spectabilis*, bleeding heart: perennial, part to full shade white or pink flower variety, blooms in spring to summer. The “Gold Heart” variety has gold foliage that also adds color all summer.

*Hosta* hybrids: part shade, leaves variegated with white or yellow, blooms in summer.

Hellebore hybrids: perennial, bloom in late winter, blooms and foliage lasting for months, colors from white to maroon.

*Ligularia* sp: perennial, bright full shade, yellow flowers in summer, several species with interesting large leaf shapes.

*Maianthemum racemosa*, False Solomon’s Seal: perennial, Northwest native, partial shade to full shade, white flower panicles in spring followed by red berries in fall.

*Polygonatum odoratum* "Variegatum", Variegated Solomon's Seal: full to partial shade, white bell-like flowers in spring, variegated foliage all summer.

*Tricyrtis hirta*, toad lily: perennial, part shade, flowers in late fall with many small orchid-like spotted blooms.

*Trillium* sp.: perennial, part shade, spring flowers, white, red or yellow depending on species.

*Cornus kousa* "Wolf Eyes", Chinese or Korean dogwood: small tree, part shade, white flowers in early summer, variegated leaves all summer with outstanding fall color.

*Hamamelis* sp, witch hazel: small tree or shrub, bright full shade to full sun, fragrant yellow or red flowers on bare branches in winter, leaves with fall color the same as the flowers.



Variegated Solomon's Seal

These are just a few of the many colorful plants that add interest to the shade garden all year. If you have enough shade, you can have all of them and many more!! Perusing the books and catalogs for shade gardening gives many ideas on plant combinations that work for color all year long. So, don't you wish you had more shade?

## References

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