

## Shade Gardening

Many gardeners view shade as a challenging situation for growing plants. The key is to discover which plants are adapted to the conditions in your garden. Several characteristics typify shade gardening. Plants growing in shade must compete with shading trees for nutrients and waters, as well as tolerate poor air circulation and low light levels.



*Polygonatum odoratum*  
(Common Name: Solomon Seal)

There are three types of shade. Light shade, partial or medium shade and full shade. Light shade may be described as an area that is shaded, but bright. It might be completely shaded for short periods of time during the day, or under a canopy of lightly branched trees providing filtered sunlight. Partial or medium shade is present when direct sunrays are blocked from an area for most of the day. This would be consistent with a large mature tree shading a section of yard for much of the day. Full shade lasts all day. Little or no direct sunlight reaches the ground at any time during the day. Dense shade refers to full shade under thick tree canopies, decks or covered patios on the north side of the house that receive full shade.

Bright bold colors are less common in shade tolerant plants than in sun-loving ones. Flowers are generally less abundant also. Therefore, shade gardens are often more subtle and restful. Plant textures shapes and colors become more important elements of the design.

Texture has many aspects. Large-leafed plants such as hostas have a course texture. Ferns, on the other hand, generally have a fine texture. Strong contrasts in texture accentuate their differences. Use strong contrasts only where emphasis is needed. Another thing to keep in mind is glossy leaves, such as those on bergenia; ivy or vinca have more impact than dull or velvety ones. And don't forget ornamental grasses, such as black mondo, hakone, maiden grass, or tufted hair grass. They do well in partial shade and will definitely add texture and contrast to your shady spots.

Foliage colors and textures can bring any shady spot some pizzazz. Even though most plants flower, it is the foliage that provides interest in the shade garden. Variegated or yellow-green foliage stands out more in the shade than solid green or blue-green foliage. Deep reds and purples may even fade unless you set those plants off by a contrasting lighter color.

Consider using height contrasts between plants such as dwarf conifers and their upright cousins to add interest. Pyramidal or columnar forms serve best as accents in shade. Weeping or rounded forms create a spacious feeling and can be used more liberally in the design.

By practicing the above suggestions, you should be well on your way to having a successful and beautiful shade garden.

For plant lists see:

- [Perennial Plant Lists](#) at the East St. Louis Action Research Project website.
- [Annuals, Perennials, and Bulbs for Partial Shade](#) at The Garden Helper site.
- [Landscape Plants for Shady Areas](#), Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service.

Book resources to check out are:

- Glattstein, Judy. Made for the Shade
- Schenk, George. The Complete Shade Garden
- Druse, Ken. The Natural Shade Garden
- Druse, Ken. Eighty Great Natural Shade Garden Plants
- Taylor, Patricia A. Easy Care Shade Flowers
- Tenenbaum, Frances. Taylors Guide to Shade Gardening
- Tenenbaum, Frances. Perennials for Shade

## Bibliography

Cox, Jeff. Perennial All Stars  
Street, John. Rhododendrons  
Brown, Sandra. Hostas  
Allen, Oliver E. Shade Gardens  
Druse, Ken. The Natural Shade Garden  
Tenenbaum, Frances. Taylors Guide to Shade Gardening  
[Shade Gardening](#) by Carl Wilson, Horticulturist.



*Dicentra formosa* 'Stuart Boothman'  
(Common name: Bleeding Heart)



Hosta 'Wide Brim'  
with Primula japonica in foreground