

Artistic Shade Gardening Tips

Thanks to Donna Forsberg for sharing her knowledge and photos of her magnificent shade garden.

There was a time when gardeners thought having shade meant not having a garden. But shade gardening offers the opportunity to get to know and use a whole new category of wonderful plants. In fact in the heat of summer, shade is as welcome to many plants as it is to gardeners. Bring your indoor plants outside and set them in deep shade, they will have a wonderful summer. Be certain to bring them in as nights get cool and clean them off with water &/or insecticidal soap before you bring any unwanted bugs into the house.

How Much Shade Do You Have?

All shade is not equal and many times the degree of shade changes with the season or even the time of day. For shade gardening, shade is defined by how long the area is without sunlight.

- **Partial Sun / Partial Shade:** These 2 terms are often used interchangeably to mean 3 - 6 hours of sun each day, preferably in the morning and early afternoon.
 - However if a plant is listed as Partial Sun, greater emphasis is put on its receiving the minimal sun requirements.
 - If a plant is listed as Partial Shade, the plant will need some relief from the intense late afternoon sun, either from shade provided by a nearby tree or planting it on the east side of a building.
- **Dappled Shade:** Dappled sunlight is similar to partial shade. It is the sun that makes its way through the branches of a deciduous tree. Woodland plants and underplantings prefer this type of sunlight over even the limited direct exposure they would get from partial shade.
- **Full shade:** Less than 3 hours of direct sunlight each day, with filtered sunlight during the rest of the day. Full shade does not mean no sun. There aren't many plants, except mushrooms, that can survive in the dark. You can lighten up full shade by removing lower tree branches and allowing more sunlight to get through.

Special Considerations for Shade Gardens

1. Soil

Many shade plants developed in woodland situations, where the soil tends to be rich and slightly acidic from the decaying leaf mold. Because the buildup of decaying plant debris is not removed in natural woodlands, there is always a nice layer of mulch keeping the soil temperature constantly cool and feeding the soil with a steady supply of nutrients.

When trying to create your own shade garden with woodland plants, try to recreate these conditions, paying special attention to providing rich soil and organic mulch.

2. Deciduous Trees and Dry Shade Gardening

Deciduous trees can offer either dappled shade or full shade. There are several attractive ground covers that will establish themselves under shade trees, like Epimedium, European ginger (*Asarum europaeum*), Liriope and sweet woodruff, but it is often easier to confine your shade gardening attempts around tree roots to early [spring bulbs](#) and ephemerals that bloom before the trees leaf out, then let the tree be the star attraction for the summer and fall. [Daffodils](#), [scilla](#) and grape hyacinth will do well under trees as will spring flowering primrose and trout lily.

Don't try to add soil on top of the tree roots, to create a garden. This will only disturb or harm the tree. It is possible to create small planting pockets between the tree roots, where you can start a few plants and allow them to establish themselves and spread. But in the competition for soil and nutrients in a limited area, a tree will always win out over an annual or perennial.

3. Working with Moving Shade

Shade is rarely fixed throughout the day. Spend some time watching the way the light and shadows fall throughout your garden space and use this light play to create focal points. For instance, if light catches a particular corner in the afternoon, brighten it further with a yellow Hosta. Deeper shade can be drawn closer with the use of variegated white foliage. Dappled shade is a wonderful tool for playing with coarse textures and bold leaves.

4. Using Structures to Create Shade Gardens

Don't be discouraged by a lack of established shade trees. You can use manmade structures to create your own shady nook. Pergolas and arbors covered with vines will provide enough shade to garden underneath. You could even use a trellis as a wall to cast shadows of shade onto an ideal spot.

5. Problems Associated with Shade Gardens

Shade gardens are no more work than sunny gardens. Most shade garden plants prefer a moist soil, so you will need to water regularly and mulch.

- **Disease:** Be on the lookout for fungal diseases that can develop because of the damp condition. To offset this, don't plant too closely and allow for good air circulation.
- **Insects:** Snails and slugs will be attracted to the cool, moist shade. Trapping and hand picking will need to be done throughout the growing season.

On the plus side, there are fewer weeds in shade, because the lack of sunlight inhibits germination.

Designing a Shade Garden

Design is always a matter of personal taste, but shade gardens lend themselves to understatement. Focusing on foliage and texture rather than flower color, will give you the most natural effect. While there are many plants that will flower in shade, colors will be more muted than in a sun garden. White flowers and variegation will add brightness to a shade garden, however yellow variegation tends to be less pronounced when grown in shady conditions. Delicate foliage and flowers lose even more definition in shade. Plants with strong form and bold leaves will stand out more clearly.

A natural woodland is layered with plants: a tall canopy of trees, under story trees and shrubs and then a herbaceous plant layer. You may not have room to recreate this, but you can create interest by choosing plants in pairings, rather than as specimens.

Choose Appropriate Plants for Your Shade Garden

The real key to shade gardening success is choosing [plants that will thrive in the shade](#) you have. Most nurseries and catalogs now group shade plants together, making it easier to make the right selections. There are also several plants that grow well in sun, such as daylilies and monarda, that will tolerate partial shade. They may not grow as quickly or bloom as profusely as in full sun, but they are worth keeping in mind when choosing shade plants.