



Gardening for Shade Areas

People gravitate to shade areas in the landscape for relaxing and entertaining guests, so why not make it a beautiful, texture-rich retreat. First, assess the area to determine how much shade it gets and when.

Assess the Planting Area

First, take a good look at the conditions of the area. Note when the shade begins during the day. Check back several times during the day to see when it receives sun. You may be tempted to plant a shade item in an area that receives shade most of the day, until afternoon, thinking that should be enough shade, but in fact, the late afternoon sun is usually the hottest of the day. Now that plant is baking in hot sun, when it should be enjoying a light breeze in a shady spot. Good examples of items that should receive shade late in the day are Azaleas, Hollies, Hydrangeas, Astilbe, Bergenia, Clematis and Hosta with light-colored leaves in cream or yellow get burned easier from late day sun.

All plants need a little bit of sun to perform photosynthesis and survive. Plants that say full shade on the plant tag should be interpreted as dappled sunlight or minimum sun exposure. Dappled light is the light that filters through leaves in a tree canopy. Or it can be an area that receives a couple of hours of sun first thing in the morning or late in the day, right before evening.

If the area you are trying to beautify with plants receives less than 4 hours of sun per day and the sun is in the morning, you can be comfortable that picking a shade item will do well here.

Know the Soil Conditions

Good, organically rich soil is key to success for growing in the shade. If the soil seems hard and lacking in nutrients, work in shredded leaf litter or compost to add nutrients to the soil. It may take several years of adding compost and working it in to get the soil to the ideal level, but any amount can help plants thrive.

Choosing the Right Plants

It's easy to walk through the plant offerings at a nursery and stop at the ones in full bloom and looking spectacular. You want to rationalize that this full sun to partial shade item can surely be planted in your landscape where it only gets 2-3 hours of sun at the most. Admire the item and keep walking! There are so many wonderful choices to add texture and color to the shade that are meant to grow in shade. Here are some plant ideas to make it an inviting area. Astilbe, Bleeding Hearts, Bowles Golden Sedge, Boxwood, Brunnera, Corydalis, Helleborus, some Heuchera varieties, Hosta with variegated or bright yellow leaves, Azalea, Hydrangeas, Primrose, Pulmonaria, Rhododendron and Taxus. This is just a few, but there are many more shade loving plants to consider.

During the summer months, color for the shade areas can be ramped up even more by adding colorful annuals to the mix. Begonias, Caladiums, Coleus, Fuchsia, Impatiens, Pansies, Perilla, Polka Dot plants or Torenia.

Watering

Does the soil in your shade area stay moist or is it dry? Some areas below trees are a good spot for shade items, but just beware you may have to supply additional water besides the rainfall. Trees can consume a lot of rain before the perennials or shrubs beneath them can benefit from a good downpour. Dry shade below big trees is the most challenging growing condition.

Mulching

Providing a layer of mulch can help conserve moisture. You may not pay as much attention to areas in the shade thinking they don't need as much hand watering as full sun areas do, but a layer of mulch can keep weeds down plus hold moisture for the plants to use.