

Shade Gardening

by Ursula Nanna, Bell County Master Gardener

In our area of Texas, it's important to have some shaded areas for personal comfort, if nothing else. The main function of shade is to keep the sun from beating directly on the house's roof or outdoor living area. Southern and western shade is the most important for a homeowner to have. Because we have a diverse group of native trees from which to choose, including trees of every height from 12 to 120', we can have a good variety in our yards. When choosing shade trees, remember that if you need a tree of 40' mature growth, you should choose trees of that growth height. If you choose, instead, a tree of 120' mature growth height, you could spend time and money keeping that tree in bounds and eventually succumbing to topping off. Topping off, or drastic de-limbing of a tree, opens up the tree to infection in the wounded areas and stresses the tree, therefore shortening its life span. Topping off also makes a tree look "really ugly" until it leafs out again.

That said, shade gardening can be a wonderful experience. You can be out gardening in the shade any time of the day while sheltered under a live, cool, shade canopy out of the direct rays of the sun. These gardens can have benches or a table for sitting areas, paths, and many plant textures supplied by shade-tolerant shrubs and plants.

Let's consider the degrees of shade we have. First the dense shade areas: no vegetation is found or very little at best. Here, an area with mulch only is probably best. Remember, plant life requires some sunlight for photosynthesis. Photosynthesis is the chemical process by which the sunlight is absorbed by the chlorophyll and is then converted to energy so the plant can convert carbon dioxide and water to food.

The next degree of shade is light/dappled shade. Here some sunlight comes through, usually about 2 to 4 hours a day. Here shade-loving woodland plants will thrive very well.

The final degree is partial shade. Here, the plants should receive full sun during either the morning or afternoon. If the plants receive full sun in the afternoon, it is best to use full sun plants. If using shade loving or shade tolerant plants, light/dappled shade is the best of all the planting areas.

When planting around trees, there are several things to remember. Do not pile soil up against the tree's trunk. This encourages pest infestation. Also, areas around robust trees will also be more dry because the tree will actually soak up the available water more quickly than the plants will. The soil should be moist but not wet. That is why raised beds with 2-3" of mulch in these shaded areas works so well. There's good drainage for the plants while allowing for the tree roots to thrive. If the planting area has been compacted by foot traffic or by time and is mostly clay, be sure to work some compost into the soil first.

Do you have MINIMAL CHOICES in plants for shade gardening? Not at all! Shade gardening now offers more choices than the traditional shade-loving hostas and caladiums. Plants for this area offer wonderful choices of texture that includes everything from soft ferns to sharp mondo grass and liriopse, and choices of color, ranging from deep green to burgundy and gold. If you find you require just a little more sunlight, carefully remove a few of the lower tree branches to shape a higher canopy.

Once you've assessed the light, the soil, and the moisture levels in the shade area you are planning, the fun begins, Plant Shopping!

Begin by getting the names, address, and phone number (in case you get lost) of local nurseries. Read mail order catalogs for plants tolerant in zone 8 (our Central Texas Zone) and search out some shade loving plants with which you are familiar and feel comfortable. Then explore the other shade tolerant plants available and choose some out of the ordinary plants you want in your garden. Decide on perennials or annuals or both. When you garden, do what pleases YOU and plant what you like. There are no set rules.

Here is a list of some of the best shade tolerant perennial plants for our area: Abelia, American beauty

berry, barberry, Boston ivy, boxwood, burning bush, cast iron plant, coralberry, flame acanthus, Texas aster, columbine, cross vine, elephant ear, holly fern, Japanese painted fern, wood fern, hosta, inland sea oats, lamb's ear, mohinia, purple loosestrife, obedient plant, Mexican petunia, phlox, pigeonberry, dianthus, nandinas, oxalis, plumbago, quince, lyreleaf sage and many other annual and perennial sages, spirea, evergreen sumac, rock rose, Turk's cap, umbrella plant, Virginia creeper, yaupon holly, and zexmenia.

These many perennial plant choices do very well in our shaded areas and will give you gardening pleasure for years. There are many annuals also suitable for our area, be sure to do your research before you buy. This will ensure that you will enjoy every phase of your shade gardening.