

Shade Gardening in the Houston Area

Annuals and Perennials for Color

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In the Houston area, a shaded garden can be a very special place. In our seemingly endless summers, shade provides welcome relief from the powerful sun and heat to the gardener and at the same time offers needed protection for many plants. But, while a green leafy retreat from the sun can be delightful, many gardeners also long for colorful, flower-filled gardens. With a little planning and carefully selected plants, everyone can have a shade garden that goes beyond green.

Types of Shade

Shade can be classified into three types:

Deep shade is found under dense, low-branched trees, or on the north side of a high wall or house. Really deep shade favors foliage, groundcovers such as ivy, ferns and aspidistra.

Medium shade occurs under higher and less dense branches where there is light but not direct sun. Shade-loving flowering plants, such as impatiens and begonias, thrive in medium shade.

Open shade, also known as partial or intermittent shade, includes the dappled light under a high, thin canopy of trees, filtered sun beneath a trellis or low light that strikes in early morning or late afternoon beneath a shady cover. Shade-tolerant plants and those that favor part sun can thrive in open shade.

Describing shade is clearly not a black and white issue. There are many gradations of shade. Some gardens may be shady in summer and quite sunny in spring before the leaves of deciduous trees come out.

Houston's climate compounds the issue. Many plants that flourish in full sun when grown in cooler or more northerly climates will benefit from some protective shade when grown in the intense heat of the Gulf Coast summer sun. Catalogs, gardening books and plant labels are often written for northern climates. Here in the South we may be able to add more shade to the diet of some plants than national gardening information suggests.

Soil Preparation

The first step in any gardening venture should be soil preparation, and this is especially true of shade gardens since tree roots will often be competing with other plants for nutrition and moisture. Organic matter worked into the soil will help retain moisture, add nutrients and improve soil texture. Add about four inches of commercial or homemade compost to the bed and work in well. Heavy clay soils may also benefit from the addition of sand. A balanced fertilizer can be worked in at this time. A soil test, which will indicate any special amendments your soil may need, can be arranged through Texas Cooperative Extension.

A raised bed is recommended for many Houston gardens. Raising the soil level improves drainage and can prevent soggy soil during the rainy spring season. If the garden bed is surrounded with landscape timbers, rocks or bricks, six inches of amended soil added over the existing ground level will provide a well-draining bed for planting. If the garden bed is to be laid out over the root system of a tree, do not add more than two inches of soil material per year to the bed as more will deprive the tree roots of needed oxygen. Additional mulch may be added over the soil, if the mulch is organic and porous.

Shady locations are often dry, due to competition from tree roots, and it is wise to consider how your shade garden will be watered. Keeping the garden adequately watered, especially when new, is essential to keeping it healthy. An underground irrigation system is handy, though expensive. A soaker hose laid on top of the bed is economical and also efficiently delivers water to the root system.

Plan on mulching your shade bed to retain moisture, control weeds and add a tidy look to the garden. About two inches of bark mulch, pine needles, rotted leaves or compost makes great mulch and adds organic matter to the soil as it decomposes.

Plants for the Shade Garden

After soil preparation, the choice of proper plant material is the next step in successful gardening. The information below will help in choosing plants that thrive in a shade garden in the Houston area.

Although it is difficult to get a lot of color in areas that are deeply shaded, the lovely gardens created in these settings can provide a cool and restful look in woodland surroundings. Color can come from leaves of caladium, coleus and other plants with colorful foliage. Impatiens and begonias will flower if there is sufficient light. In a heavily shaded garden, leaf texture and plant shape will add interest. This is also a good place for a garden sculpture or a small fountain or pond.

In a partially shaded garden, a moderate amount of light is introduced by way of sun for a few hours each day, providing dappled light or bright shade. Just a little light opens up a lot of possibilities for the garden with dappled shade.

Listed below are annual and perennial plants that will do well in a Houston shade garden. Annual plants (A) complete their life cycle in one year and generally must be replaced every year. Perennials (P) should persist in the garden for years under favorable conditions. All of the plants listed below are suited to partially-shaded Houston gardens. Those identified with a DS will tolerate deep shade, although foliage color or flowering may be diminished relative to their growth in partial shade.

Agapanthus (lily-of-the-Nile). *Agapanthus* sp., P, rhizome.

Attractive clumps of strap-shaped leaves, often evergreen, with blue or white flowers clusters of 3-foot stalks in May–June. Needs rich soil and regular watering, may naturalize.

Ageratum (floss flower). *Ageratum houstonianum*, A.

Flowers of blue or white, spring through fall, 6 to 12 inches high, prolific bloomer. Keep adequately watered to prevent spider mites.

Aspidistra (cast iron plant). *Aspidistra elatior*, P/DS.

Dark green, upright 24-inch strap-shaped leaves with tuberous roots. Striking foliage, best in dense clumps, evergreen leaves. Good in containers.

Begonia, wax. *Begonia semperflorens*, A/DS.

Rounded 6- to 12-inch mounds of green or bronze leaves, with abundant small white, pink or red blossoms in spring through summer. Reliable blooms in moist, organic-rich soil. Some varieties tolerate sun.

Browallia. *Browallia americana*, A.

Blue, white or purple 12- inch high blooms in summer. Pinch back trailing growth to promote compactness.

Caladium. *Caladium bicolor*, P, tuber/DS.

Variegated foliage, 12 to 24 inches high in red, white, pink and green. Requires moist soil for dramatic mass display. Tubers should be lifted and stored in the fall.

Calla lily. *Zantedeschia aethiopica*, P, bulb.

Exotic white lily in spring on 24-inch stem, with attractive glossy foliage; also yellow and pink varieties. Requires moist, organic-rich soil.

Chocolate plant. *Pseuderanthemum alatum*, A/DS.

Leaves, 2 inches, brown, silver-splotched. Occasional small, lavender flowers on spikes. Striking foliage.

Coleus. *Coleus* hyb., A/DS.

Colorful 1- to 2-foot variegated foliage in many combinations of maroon, red, pink, yellow, white and green. Effective planted in mixed groupings or in masses of one type. Requires moisture and good drainage. Pinch off flowers for better foliage production. (Some new hybrid varieties of coleus, especially those in the 'Sun' series, prefer full-sun locations.)

Columbine. *Aquilegia* spp., P.

Airy foliage and delicate spring blossoms in pink, yellow, blue or white. Hinkley columbine is a hardy Texas native. Require moist but well-drained, sandy soil.

Elephant ear. *Colocasia antiquorum*, P/DS, tuber.

Striking, large leaves on stalks up to 5 ft. tall, tuberous roots. A tropical look, requires moist soil.

Fern. Many types, P/DS.

A wide variety of ferns will do well in our area, and they are perhaps the quintessential shade foliage. Consider cinnamon, holly fern, lady, leatherleaf, maiden hair, royal and wood fern. Need moist, organic-rich soil.

Ginger. *Hedychium* spp., *Alpina* spp., *Curcuma* spp., *Kaempferia* spp., *Zingiber* spp., P, rhizome.

Several species of ginger are well-adapted to the Houston area and are notable for their tropical foliage and exotic flowers. Many Houston gardeners have found that the peacock gingers (*Kaempferia* spp.) are excellent local substitutes for hostas.

Hydrangea. *Hydrangea macrophylla*, P.

Shrubs 3 to 4 feet high with white, blue or pink blossoms in early summer. Lace cap flower type and variegated leaves are interesting varieties. Need bright or partial shade for best flowering. To promote blue flowers, acidify soil; increasing alkalinity favors pink blossoms.

Impatiens (busy Lizzies, jewel weed). *Impatiens wallerana*, A/DS.

Profuse bloomer in moist, organic soil, 6- to 24-inch plants with red, white, orange, pink, lavender or salmon blossoms for spring to frost. Pinch back to encourage compact growth. Dwarf, double, variegated and New Guinea hybrids also available.

Indigofera (pink indigo). *Indigofera kirilowii*, P.

Shrub, 2 to 3 feet, with delicate foliage and clusters of pale pink flowers, spring through fall. Spreads by underground runners in loose soil.

Ivy. *Hedera* spp., P/DS.

Useful groundcover or climbing vine of dark green, glossy leaves. Consider Algerian or English ivy.

Jacobinia. *Justica carnea*, P.

Mats of runners make 4- to 8-inch groundcover of small leaves and small pink flowers, spring through frost.

Lamium (deadnettle). *Lamium* spp., P/DS.

Green or variegated foliage for groundcover to 6 feet high.

Leopard plant. *Ligularia tussilaginea*, P.

Rounded clumps of glossy, dark leaves with yellow spots, a striking foliage on tuberous roots, especially suitable for pots. Moist, fertile, well-draining soil.

Liriope (lily turf). *Liriope muscari*, P/DS.

Groundcover, 6 to 18 inches, grass-like foliage, blue or white flowers spikes in summer, but grown primarily for tough durable foliage, often as borders or mass planting. Also variegated and giant varieties.

Monkey grass (mondo grass). *Ophiopogon* spp., P/DS.

Dark green, grass-like foliage, 4 to 8 inches, forms dense planting of foliage, useful as groundcover or edging. Very tough, may be invasive. Also variegated forms.

Mimulus (monkey flower). *Mimulus* spp., A.

Showy red, yellow and orange spring flowers, 8 inches high. Moist soil.

Nicotiana (flowering tobacco). *Nicotiana* hyb., A.

Flowers 12 to 24 inches high, spikes in red, white, pink and pale yellow. Fragrant blooms summer to fall in sandy, fertile soil, with adequate water.

Obedient plant. *Physostegia virginiana*, P.

Lavender or white flowers in spring or fall, on 2- to 3-foot stalks. Hardy, may be invasive. Remove dead flowers and prune to promote compact growth.

Pentas (Egyptian star cluster). *Pentas lanceolata*, P.

Bushy, 1- to 4-foot growth of dark green leaves and clusters of small flowers of red, pink and white in summer and fall. Dwarf and standard varieties give a broad range of plant heights. Hardy, well-adapted and profuse bloomers in both sun and partial shade.

Persian shield. *Strobilanthes dyeranus*, P/DS.

Striking silver-purple foliage to 4 feet. Unusual and interesting.

Pigeonberry. *Rivina humilis*, P.

Native groundcover, 6 inches with small pink flowers and bright red berries, often at the same time.

Purple heart. *Tradescantia pallida*, P/DS.

Groundcover, 10-inch, long-jointed sprawling plant with succulent stems and deep purple, pointed leaves. Hardy, but may be invasive.

Sago palm. *Cycas revoluta*, P.

Stiff, glossy fern-like leaves in rosette on short, 2- to 3-foot trunk. May be evergreen, but protect from freezes. Not a true palm. Excellent container plant for partial shade, or sun.

Salvia (annual salvia, scarlet sage). *Salvia splendens*, A.

Flower spikes, 8 to 18 inches, in red, purple, pink and white. Some varieties require full sun, but most prefer partial shade. Prune when flowers fade to promote more bloom.

Shrimp plant. *Justicia brandegeana*, P.

Shrubby foliage, 2 to 4 feet, bronze-colored bracts in spring through fall. Drought tolerant.

Torenia (wishbone flower). *Torenia fournieri*, A.

Eight-in. tall clumps of flowers in combination of violet, white and yellow, late spring to fall. Fertile and moist soil.

Umbrella plant. *Cyperus alternifolius*, P.

Long, 2- to 4-foot stems with large palm-like leaves. Accepts moist or dry soil.

Violet. *Viola odorata*, P.

Clumps, 6 inches, of fragrant purple and white flowers in spring. Moist, organic-rich soil. Dark green heart-shaped leaves make an attractive, spreading groundcover.

Wedelia. *Wedelia trilobata*, P.

Dark green, serrated leaves on trailing runners, with 1-inch daisy-like yellow flower, if plant receives sufficient sun.



Gardening fact sheets are distributed by Harris County Master Gardeners, community volunteers trained in basic horticulture by Texas Cooperative Extension. For information about Master Gardener volunteer training classes, call Harris County Cooperative Extension at 281.855.5600, or send an e-mail to harris@ag.tamu.edu.