

# SHADE GARDENS



*Enkianthus campanulatus*  
PHOTO: Vic Bentley

Gardening in the shade is no more difficult than gardening in sunny areas. In fact, a shade garden is considered by many a calm and serene oasis—a cool place to work in, a more pleasant place to stroll or relax in. Plan a place to sit or add a water feature to liven up the garden. Use bright containers to add color and a focal point.

Colors in shade plants are usually more subtle, so look for texture and variations in leaf size. Glossy leaves have more impact. Use variegated or yellow-green foliage. Light colors stand out better in the shade. Colored foliage has a longer-lasting effect than focusing on blooms.

**The benefit of a properly designed and constructed shade garden is that it is easier to maintain because:**

- the soil doesn't dry out as quickly
- not as much watering is required
- weeds grow more slowly
- there are fewer insect problems (pests such as aphids and caterpillars prefer sun).

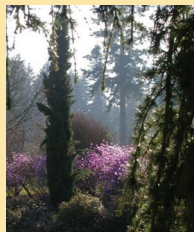
It is very important to read light requirements on plant labels. Any area receiving less than 6 hours of unobstructed sun is considered shady. The only dream that you will probably need to give up is a lawn. Where in native woodlands do you see a first-class lawn? The deeper the shade, the more difficult it is to grow good grass. So let it go and enjoy the hours free of lawn mowing!

Before purchasing the first plant, it is vital to get out in the garden and examine the condition of soil and the type of shade.

## SOIL CONDITION

**Make notes of the growing conditions in your garden. Soil conditions can be:**

- hot, dry (e.g. close to a south-facing wall)
- cool, damp (e.g. by a north-facing fence on heavy clay soil)
- moist and cool (e.g. under deep-rooted oaks)
- dry, cool (e.g. under shallow-rooted maples).



Front cover:  
Mist in the morning  
at the UBC  
Botanical Garden

If you are installing a garden in a woodland setting, probably little needs to be done. However, for all but the very best garden loam, extra time spent to prepare the soil before planting will pay dividends. This is especially true in the shade garden. To mimic the soil conditions that exist in woods, spread 5–8 cm (2–3 in.) of organic matter (compost, well-rotted manure, peat moss, chopped leaves, grass clippings) and work it in to a depth of 15 cm (6 in.). If the soil is particularly heavy, work it in several inches deeper. Soil with good structure provides the right amount of air space and good drainage with adequate water retention. If there is too much water in the root zone for too long, roots die from lack of air, whereas soil with good structure is hard to overwater.

**Soil has good structure when:**

- it doesn't compact after watering or rain
- it doesn't leave a hard crust on the surface as it dries
- it is easy to work with hand tools
- it is friable: loose, almost a fluffy texture.

Many organic materials used as amendments can also be applied as 5–8 cm (2–3 in.) of mulch, meant to lie on top of soil as an aid in long-term improvement. It is recommended to apply mulch in spring before weed growth begins, or after the earliest weeding in mild coastal climates.

## TYPES OF SHADE

While broad classifications of shade can be studied, it is important to also become aware of your own garden's microclimate. City shade has a much different dimension from woodland shade. The shade created by tall buildings in a city core, while solid, also creates areas open to the sky which provides quite bright light. The microclimate created by walls and fences that deflect winds and reflect sunshine can be significantly different from the general area. In such spaces, you may even be able to grow plants outside the normal hardiness zones. Become familiar with the multitude of climatic influences (fog, rain, wind, clouds) that affect your area. Your own experience will become the best guide to interpreting planting guides.

### Open Shade

This is created by a northern exposure, such as the north side of a house or at the edge of woodland. If the house is white, or in proximity to a south-facing wall that reflects light, brightness will greatly increase. Shade-loving plants will tolerate morning sun, but rapidly stress in afternoon sun. This category provides the widest range of shade gardening possibilities. If the shade is bright and open, a lot of sun-loving plants can grow in this situation.

### Dappled Shade

This is fairly bright shade, produced when trees filter sunlight. Direct sun on any given area is minimal. If the area receives 2–6 hours of sun/day, most sun-loving plants can grow here.

### Heavy/Dense/Full Shade

This is created in north-facing locations, further obscured and shaded by a structure, tall building or large evergreen trees. No direct sun reaches this area. In the absence of light reflectors, few plants can grow in continuous deep shade.

Walls constructed of brick or dark stone create dense shade and also create an oven-like environment, absorbing the sun's heat during the day and casting it off at night. Plants that love cool shade could not survive in this environment.

On the northern side of a building, between houses and rarely viewed, installing something simple like moss, stones or gravel may be the best solution.



Eucalyptus at UBC Botanical Garden

## MODIFYING SHADE

If the shade is caused by heavy shading trees such as oak or large coniferous trees that are permanent, you may be able to do selective thinning/pruning. If the trees are large it is wise to employ a professional.

If pruning small trees/shrubs, start by removing deadwood. Sometimes, that may be all that is necessary. If more thinning is needed, remove some twigs from bushier branches. If there are two competing branches or twigs, remove the lower one. Always use sharp tools to make clean cuts.

If the area is shaded by large trees with masses of surface roots, such as sycamore, maple, elm, or thick pine forest, the solution may be to under-plant with container plantings.

If the trees drop leaves that are toxic to other plants (e.g. eucalyptus), you may need to avoid under-planting anything.

If shade is summer shade created by dense-leaved trees such as beech or maple, try growing plants that bloom in spring or fall.

## PLANTS FOR SHADE

Among deciduous shade plants, other than azaleas, hydrangea and forsythia, those listed below provide fruit, fragrant flowers, fall color and are attractive to birds and butterflies.

*Berberis* (Barberry)  
*Callicarpa* (Beautyberry)  
*Calycanthus floridus* (Carolina Allspice, Strawberry shrub)  
*Chaenomeles japonica* (Japanese Quince)  
*Clethra alnifolia* (Sweet Pepperbush) – will take full shade.  
*Corylus avellana* (European Filbert)  
*Cotoneaster*  
*Enkianthus campanulatus*  
*Euonymus alatus* (Burning Bush)  
*Hamamelis mollis* or *H. x intermedia* (Chinese Witch Hazel)  
*Kerria japonica*  
*Philadelphus coronarius* (Sweet Mock-orange)  
*Sambucus canadensis* (Elderberry) or *S. racemosa* 'Plumosa Aurea'  
*Spiraea x vanhouttei*  
*Symphoricarpos* (Snowberry)  
*Vaccinium corymbosum* (High bush Blueberry)  
*Viburnum*

Evergreen shrubs suitable for shade, other than camellia and rhododendrons, include the following.

*Andromeda polifolia* (Bog Rosemary)  
*Arbutus unedo* (Strawberry Tree)  
*Aucuba japonica* (Japanese Acuba) – takes full shade.  
*Choisya ternata* (Mexican Mock Orange)  
*Daphne odora* (Winter Daphne)  
*Euonymus fortunei*  
*Fatsia japonica*  
*Kalmia latifolia* (Mt. Laurel)  
*Leucothoe fontanesiana* (Drooping Leucothoe) – will take full shade.  
*Mahonia aquifolium* (Oregon Grape)  
*Nandina domestica* (Heavenly bamboo) – provides all-season interest  
*Pieris floribunda*  
*Sarcococca hookerana* var. *humilis* (Sweet Box)  
*Skimmia japonica*  
*Taxus* (Yew)



*Mahonia aquifolium* PHOTO: Janet Sawatsky



*Calycanthus floridus* PHOTO: Vic Bentley

## WATERING

Most shade plants prefer a moist soil, so in addition to regular deep soaking, mulching with an organic layer will provide extra fertility, as well as natural moisture retention.

When under-planting a large tree with perennials or annuals, be aware that little natural rainfall reaches the ground, so these plants will need regular watering in spring and summer when growing rapidly and competing with the tree's well-established root system.

Water thoroughly; let the soil dry out slightly between waterings. It is easier to overwater a shade garden as lack of sunlight reduces evaporation. Deep watering promotes deep strong root systems that are able to withstand some neglect.

## FERTILIZING

A mild fertilizer like 5:1:1 or 5:10:5 can be used to provide a steady supply of nutrients since plant metabolism is slower in shade. Acid-loving plants can be given special fertilizers labelled azalea or camellia or rhododendron food.

## DESIGNING A SHADE GARDEN

**When designing a shade garden, ask yourself these questions:**

- From what viewpoint do you most often view the garden?
- Do you prefer a formal or informal design?
- What is your style? Gardening styles can be slow to develop in us and are sometimes a personal statement. Two styles particularly well-suited to shade-loving plants are "woodland" and "oriental".

Do not be tempted to ignore the planning stage. Any garden that catches your eye probably started with a carefully designed plan. Time invested in drawing up an overall plan will pay dividends in terms of beauty, enjoyment and avoidance of costly mistakes. If you truly enjoy your outdoor space but are unsure of your ability to design, do not hesitate to call in professional design help.

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# Master Gardeners Association of British Columbia

The Master Gardeners Association of British Columbia is a volunteer organization providing information about gardening and horticulture to the community and educating people about environmentally responsible gardening practices.

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Master Gardeners, 5251 Oak Street  
Vancouver, BC V6M 4H1  
Telephone messages: 604-257-8662  
Email: [gardener@bcmastergardeners.org](mailto:gardener@bcmastergardeners.org)

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## A Master Gardener Fact Sheet