



Ah, shade.

Create your own garden retreat

By Blair Farris

Shade gardens are very simple. They have limited light, whether shaded by buildings or trees. But having a shade garden is far different than having a shade retreat. And in our summer southern gardens, a shady spot is a much needed respite from the heat and sun.



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So let's plan your retreat. Whether working on your existing shade garden or creating a new one, think layers.

Soil: It makes a difference

First you need the correct soil so the plants will thrive. I recommend aiming for a soil with a loamy texture. This means a mixture of clay (which we all have), compost and sand. You don't want the soil to have too much clay or the plants will drown in the water and, in turn, be too dry during drought. You also don't want it to be too sandy so that the water immediately drains out. The soil should be dark, rich and easy to plant in.

Start from the top down

Trees should make up the top layer of your shade garden. You can start with tall hardwoods such as elms, oaks or

maples and then create an understory with ornamental shade trees such as Dogwoods or Redbuds.

I love Dogwood trees en masse. They create an ephemeral white or pink layer in the understory. Redbuds are also beautiful. Purple and pink flowers cover the branches before the leaves come out. The heart shaped leaves are large enough to flutter in the breeze.

Forest Pansy is an interesting variety with dark purple leaves that turn green in

June. Cherry trees are one of my favorite ornamental trees. They bloom profusely in the spring. With time, if they are planted en masse or in an alley, they create dappled shade underneath, which is perfect for planting shade shrubs and perennials.

The next layer: Shrubs

Shrubs are the second layer of a shade garden. My favorites are Rhododendron, Camellias, Azaleas, Hydrangea and Viburnum. Rhododendron and Azaleas are evergreen and bloom in mass in the spring.



Some superior cultivars in the Rododendron family are *Roseum Superbum* with her beautiful rose, purple flowers and *Roseum Elegans* with lavender pink flowers.

Hydrangeas are the workhorse of a shade garden. They are fabulous when massed in threes or fives. Traditional *Hydrangea macrophylla* are the blue mopheads that we see in many southern gardens. These bloom once on old wood and then are done. Growers have hybridized the *macrophylla*. They are called Endless Summer and Proven Winners. These Hydrangeas bloom on new wood so they rebloom when you cut them. They also will still bloom if we get a late freeze.

Oakleaf Hydrangea blooms are large white panicles that can be a specimen or an accent plant in gardens. It's also beautiful in the fall when the foliage turns a brilliant orange-red. It can thrive in drier conditions than the *Hydrangea macrophylla*. The cultivar

Snowflake has stunning double flowers. *Hydrangea arborescens*, Annabelle, is a true show-stopper. Its solid white blooms can be up to a foot in diameter.

The third layer: Perennials

Choose the Hosta Sum and Substance to brighten a shady spot. With lime green leaves that are a foot and a half wide, the plant can reach up to four feet in diameter. It is wonderful paired with Great Expectations or American Icon (lime green and dark green). Fragrant Blue is a smaller variety that has blue-tinged foliage. Hostas, known for their leaves, have the surprising gift of bloom when spikes of white or purple flowers emerge in the summer.

There are many types of ferns that add a soft touch to a shade garden. Japanese Holly Ferns are evergreen with shiny leaves. Lady Ferns are much finer in texture with

lacy, long arching fronds. They tolerate drier areas such as under large trees. *Athyrium niponicum*, or Japanese Silver-Painted Ferns, is a small treasure in the garden. Each frond has silvery markings with red highlights.

I could go on forever, but other perennials for shady spots are astilbe, bleeding heart, coral bells and my very favorite of all: Lenten Rose. Try the Hellebore orientalis in white, pink and purple with spots and speckles of darker color. They bloom in the late winter when the garden is bare and are evergreen year-round. The flowers will last weeks on the plant and in a vase.

The last layer: ground covers

To complete your shade garden, plant ground covers to move the eye down. *Ajuga* spreads in lush low mats that have vibrant blue purple flower spikes in the spring. Chocolate Chip is a lovely small variety. Black Scallop has such dark purple leaves that they almost seem black. Burgundy Glow has a variegated leaf with burgundy, cream and green variegated foliage. Strawberry Begonia is also another spreading ground cover with round, slightly variegated, leaves. In May, it sends up masses of white spiky flowers that look like tiny fireflies. Definitely worth looking for in the nursery.

Now, for your final step: Sit back with a cold drink and enjoy the shade!! ■

For more than 16 years, Blair Farris, a Charlotte-based landscape designer, has used her education and talents to create beautiful and interesting spaces for commercial and residential properties. Visit her website at www.blairfarrisdesigns.com.



To learn more about Hydrangeas, here is an exciting and helpful website: www.hydrangeashydrangeas.com

For the book-lover

This is a true gardening bible: "Taylor's Guide to Shade Gardening: More Than 350 Trees, Shrubs, and Flowers That Thrive Under Difficult Conditions." Frances Tenenbaum, editor; Steve Buchanan, illustrator.

Another beautiful book is "Making the Most of Shade: How to Plan, Plant and Grow a Fabulous Garden that Lightens up the Shadows." Larry Hodgson, author.

Looking for unique shade plants?

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This month's gardening tips

Make sure to check that your irrigation system is working correctly. You can add drip lines to your containers to keep your plants looking beautiful all summer. And don't forget to deadhead your annuals to keep them blooming.

