



PLANT NEBRASKA

Made for Shade

Tips and Plants Suggestions for Shade Gardening

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When it comes to planning and selecting plants for a shade garden, there is an impressive selection to choose from. But before you even begin to choose your plants, consider the following tips to ensure your shade garden has the best chance to thrive.

Step 1: Consider the Soil and Moisture

When planning a shade garden, pay attention to the existing soil; it might be heavy clay, compacted or lacking organic matter.

Moreover, many native woodland plants can handle dry shade with no problem, but many others prefer more consistent moisture and rich organic soils. Improve your soil by topdressing compost over the area to a depth of 1-2" or so, working it in as you plant. Plan your garden so the leaves that fall from overhead trees remain nestled between your plants, becoming nature's mulch. As they break down, the leaves provide an excellent source of nutrition for the plants. Plan to leave the leaves and only provide a "light raking" during spring cleanup.



Step 2: Consider the Space and Light

If your shade garden is situated under big, established trees, consider planting smaller plug-size pots, which are easier to insert into tight spaces between large tree roots. Also consider the type of shade you have. Deep shade is the most difficult type of shade for plants to grow in. Yes, even shade plants need some light to thrive. For most woodland plants, dappled shade is ideal, with a mix of sun and shadow from the filtered light coming through the leaves. Partial shade receives some direct sunlight, typically from 3-6 hours, often in the morning or afternoon. Many shade plants prefer morning sunlight and need protection from the intense afternoon sun.

Plants for a Shade Garden

Groundcover Plants

Plant groundcovers to create a green, living mulch, because like hardwood mulch, they suppress undesirable weeds, hold moisture and cover areas of bare ground. Some of these plants are aggressive spreaders, so take caution with planting locations.

***Aster, Bigleaf** (*Aster macrophyllus*)—foliage 1' high; flowers 2-3' high; a very large-leaved aster, slowly spreads to form broad, dense carpets; pale violet flower spikes in fall attract butterflies; deer resistant foliage.

Bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans*)—6" high; easy to grow with shiny, dark green to purple foliage; forms a dense carpet; blue-violet flower spikes in spring; prefers moist, well-drained soils.

***Golden ragwort** (*Packera aurea*)— 12" high; golden daisies over shiny green-toothed leaves in spring; self-seeds and colonizes; excellent ground cover for heavy shade.

***Goldenrod, Zigzag** (*Solidago flexicaulis*)— 2-3' high; distinctive crooked stems bend at 45° angles. Starry, medium-yellow flowers; excellent pollinator; dependable and easy to grow; creeps slowly.

**Indicates a regionally native plant*

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***Mistflower** (*Conoclinium coelestinum*)—spreads quickly to form a nice groundcover; prefers moist, well-drained soils and a half day of sun; lovely ageratum-like, blue, fuzzy flowers in late summer into fall.

Snowdrop Anemone (*Anemone sylvestris*)—12-18" high; slowly spreads to form a dense mat of lustrous, dark green foliage; pure white nodding flowers rise above the foliage in mid-spring.

***Wild Ginger** (*Asarum canadense*)—6" high; attractive, shiny, heart-shaped leaves; forms a dense carpet. It needs rich, well-drained soils to thrive; spreads slowly; reddish, tube-shaped flowers.

Sweet Woodruff (*Galium odoratum*)—8-12" high; attractive mat-forming groundcover; whorls of lance-shaped leaves; topped with masses of tiny white flowers in mid-spring; prefers moist, rich soil.

Spotted Dead Nettle (*Lamium maculatum*)—6-8" high; easy, dependable plant in rich, moist soil, but avoid poorly drained, wet soils; variegated foliage, clusters of small, pink to white flowers in spring.

***Solomon's Seal, False** (*Smilacina racemosa*)—12-15" high; looks like Solomon's seal, only slightly smaller; small clusters of white flowers top plants in spring, followed by red berries in late summer.

***Solomon's Seal** (*Polygonatum biflorum*)—2-3' high; leaves arranged along arching stems; small white flowers in spring; colonizing groundcover; yellow in fall with black berries.

***Stonecrop, Woodland** (*Sedum ternatum*)—4-8" high; three-leaf stonecrop forms a dense mat of succulent, mouse-eared foliage; showy sprays of star-like white flowers in late spring; easy to grow, drought tolerant, but prefers moist, well-drained soil.

Native Plants For Naturalizing

These wildflowers are great additions to any woodland garden, and although some are short-lived (1-3 years), they should still be included. These beauties perpetuate in the garden by reseeding themselves. You can gather seeds and sow them where you want or let them seed out on their own.

***Celandine Poppy** (*Stylophorum diphyllum*)—15" high; perennial with handsome, gray-green, lobed and toothed leaves; is known for its large, poppy-like, yellow flowers.

***Virginia Bluebells** (*Mertensia virginiana*)—18" high; easy to grow; loose clusters of lovely, nodding bluebells in spring; spreads to form colonies; will go dormant by late spring.

***Wild Columbine** (*Aquilegia canadensis*)—2-3' high; native spring wildflower with drooping, bell-like, 1-2", red and yellow flowers and finely cut foliage. Hardy even in dry shade.

***Wild Geranium** (*Geranium maculatum*)—18"; high; lilac-pink flowers in spring and early summer; dark green, deeply cut foliage; will seed around to form colonies.

***Woodland Phlox** (*Phlox divaricata*)—12" high; starry, lavender flowers bloom in the spring, are fragrant and attract hummingbirds and butterflies; summer dormant; reseeds to form attractive colonies.

Native Sedges Have the Edges

Native sedges add form, fine texture and color to dappled shade created by overstory trees. They are a great choice for dry, part-shade areas providing year-round vegetative cover. They are a smart choice to plant as a low mow green carpet, a naturalistic border edge or underplanting among tall perennials as nature's mulch. Create a sedge meadow effect by interplanting with spring blooming woodland ephemerals, bulbs or seasonal stars.

***Appalachian Sedge** (*Carex appalachia*)—8-16" high; forms a tidy mound of fine-textured foliage; thrives in dry shade and best with good drainage; attractive fiber optic-like seeds heads in spring.

***Bristleleaf Sedge** (*Carex eburnea*)—The finest needle-like foliage on low groundcover type sedge; extremely drought tolerant and semi-evergreen; does best in half day shade.

***Oak Sedge** (*Carex albicans*)—8-12" high; clump-forming sedge with fine-textured, arching foliage; thrives in dry shade; one of the best woodland sedges, easy and dependable.

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***Pennsylvania Sedge** (*Carex pennsylvanica*)—Fine-textured groundcover that spreads by underground rhizomes to form a dense, lush groundcover; dry to wet, part-shade conditions; easy and adaptable; does well in full sun with adequate moisture, like a bioswale or with some irrigation.

***Rosy Sedge** (*Carex rosea*)—6" high and 12" wide; clump-forming sedge with fine foliage; thrives in dry shade. Small star-shaped seed heads top wiry stems reminiscent of fiber optic grass.

***Sprengel's Sedge** (*Carex sprengelii*)—2' high; clump-forming, medium-textured, bright green foliage; dry to wet shade ground cover; lax, arching habit; can be cut back if desired to tidy up in summer.

Native Plants For Rich, Organic Soils

The following plants are mostly spring ephemerals, which need full to partial sun before tree leaves emerge. Tree canopy shades them as they go dormant later in the spring or early summer. In addition to shade, they require a moist, humus-rich, soil, mixed natural leaf litter. They tolerate drier conditions as they go dormant.

***Dutchman's Breeches** (*Dicentra cucullaria*)—2" high; attractive, blue-green, fern-like foliage topped with showy "V"-shaped flowers in early spring; goes dormant by early summer.

***Bloodroot** (*Podophyllum peltatum*)—6-10" high; bright white flowers emerge in early spring followed by large, deeply lobed leaves. It will spread to form colonies if growing conditions are good; dormant by mid-summer.

***Great Blue Lobelia** (*Lobelia silphitica*)—3-4' high; upright, clump-forming plant with attractive foliage; erect flowering stems with lovely blue flowers in late summer.

***Jack-in-the-Pulpit** (*Arisaema triphyllum*)—18" high; large leaves and unusual purplish or green club-like flowers develops into cluster of bright scarlet berries; plant in leaf/mold/humus soil in part or full shade.

***Mayapple** (*Podophyllum peltatum*)—8-12" high; umbrella-shaped, emerald green foliage; spreads underground to form a groundcover; early spring flowers, followed by an apple-like fruit.

Native Plants for Dappled Shade

***Aster, Heartleaf** (*Aster cordifolius*)—2-3' high; nice, low groundcover of heart-shaped leaves in the spring with erect, branching, flat topped, daisy-like flowers of pale purple with rose to yellow inner disk flowers; self-seeding and rhizomatic spreading can occur.

***Aster, Short's** (*Aster shortii*)—3-4' high; upright, mounded habit; light purple flowers in late summer into fall; can be pinched back in early summer to increase branching; great pollinator plant.

***Aster, White Wood** (*Aster divaricatus*)—2-3' high; a low, mounding, aster with heart or oval shaped leaves and a rhizomatic root system. Flat-topped, branched flower clusters appear from late summer into mid fall; frequented by many pollinator species.

***Beebalm, Bradbury's** (*Monarda bradburiana*)—2' high; pinkish flowers with purple spots in May; excellent nectar source for bees; mildew resistant foliage; easy to grow.

***Bowman's Root** (*Gillenia trifoliata*)—2-3' high; handsome foliage; unique, white, star-like blooms in late spring. Prefers fertile, evenly moist soils, but is drought tolerant; trifoliate, serrated foliage and red-tinged stems; takes several years to mature, but worth the wait.

***Creeping Jacob's Ladder** (*Polemonium reptans*)—8" high; light blue, bell-shaped flowers in loose clusters appear mid to late spring. Prefers moist, well-drained soil and part shade.

***Fringed Bleeding Heart** (*Dicentra eximia*)—12-18" high; mounding, fern-like, bluish-green foliage; drooping, pink flowers rise above foliage in spring; southeast U.S. native; prefers moist, well-drained soils.

***Goldenrod, Blue-Wreath** (*Solidago caesia*)—18"-3' high; clumping habit with arching, blue-green stems; tough, easy to grow; golden yellow sprays top plants in early fall.

***Indian Pink** (*Spigelia marilandica*)—2' high; upright, clump-forming; topped with clusters of red tubular flowers with a star-like bright yellow center; long-lived, but takes several years to reach maturity.

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* **Joe-Pye Weed, Sweet** (*Eupatorium purpureum*)—5-6'; large clusters of lavender-pink flowers in late summer; butterfly magnet; prefers rich, moist soils; native to open woods. This is the most shade tolerant Joe-Pye species.

* **Penstemon, Calico** (*Penstemon calycosus*)—4' high; a more shade-tolerant variety of beardtongue with pink flowers; nectar source for a large variety of long-tongued pollinators, several bee species and hummingbirds.

* **Prairie Alumroot** (*Heuchera richardsonii*)—2' high; tiny, yellow bell flowers on stems above dark green basal foliage that can grow to 15". Heart-shaped leaves turn rosy, red after frost.

* **Skullcap, Hoary** (*Scutellaria incana*)—2-3' high; a bushy, upright plant with rounded, gray-green leaves; topped with 6" upright clusters of tubular blue-violet flowers in late spring; easy and adaptable, tolerates heat, drought.

* **Wood Mint, Downy** (*Blephilia ciliata*)—1-2' high; upright, clump-forming habit; gray-green, mint-scented leaves. Lavender-pink flower clusters, arranged in tiers, circle the stems in late spring to early summer; pollinator magnet.

* **Wood Mint, Hairy** (*Blephilia hirsuta*)—2-3' high; upright, clump-forming habit; gray-green, fuzzy leaves. White flower clusters circle the stems in late spring to early summer; pollinator magnet.

Bold in the Background

* **Black Cohosh** (*Actaea racemosa*)—4-6' high; attractive clumps of fern-like foliage; white, fragrant flowers on spires that rise above the basal foliage; takes several years to mature, but worth the wait.

* **Figwort, Early** (*Scrophularia lanceolata*)—5' high; clump-forming with lance-shaped foliage and tiny, urn-shaped flowers in spring; not very showy, but a pollinator magnet as one of the most prolific nectar producing plants.

* **Figwort, Late** (*Scrophularia marilandica*)—5-7' high; clump-forming, upright perennial with large, serrated leaves; the durable stalks give rise to tiny, reddish-brown flowers in late summer; a top notch native for pollinator gardens.

* **Hyssop, Yellow Giant** (*Agastache nepetoides*)—5-6' high; erect, sturdy stems topped with bright green flower spikes with tiny, pale-yellow flowers in late summer; bumble bees love this plant; attractive upright seed heads persist through the winter. It will seed around, but seedlings are easy to remove or enjoy.

Japanese Anemone (*Anemone x hybrida*)—3-4' high; clump-forming, with handsome dark green foliage; showy, pink or white open-faced flowers bloom on naked stems that rise above the basal foliage in late summer; easy to grow and long-lived. It can seed around, but easily managed or removed.

Seasonal Stars

Bergenia, Heartleaf (*Bergenia cordifolia*)—12-15" high; large, shiny, heart-shaped leaves can turn reddish-bronze in the fall; clump-forming; pink flower clusters rise above the foliage in early spring.

Barrenwort (*Epimedium versicolor*)—beautiful, red-tinted foliage in the spring; short-spurred, yellow or red flowers rise above foliage in early spring on wiry stems; very drought tolerant, long-lived and easy to grow.

Bleeding Hearts (*Dicentra spectabilis*)—1-2" mounded plants with soft, fern-like foliage and showy, drooping, heart-shaped flowers in spring; will go dormant in the heat of summer; easy to grow, dependable.

Coral Bells (*Heuchera species*)—12-15" high; low, mounding plant with handsome foliage; dainty, bell-shaped flower clusters top wiry stems that rise above the foliage in mid spring.

Hosta (*Hosta species*)—12"-3' high; clump-forming plant with large, heart-shaped leaves; fail-safe, long-lived, drought tolerant; leaves are dark green, powder blue, chartreuse, gold or variegated.

Lady's Mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*)—18" high; attractive, mat-forming foliage; spays of tiny yellow flowers in spring.

Lenten Rose (*Helleborus x hybrida*)—2' high; thick, dark green, umbrella-like, semi-evergreen foliage; nodding, cup-shaped flowers of white, pink and purple in early spring.

Lungwort (*Pulmonaria longifolia*)—8-12" wide; clump-forming with large oval leaves speckled with white; clusters of bell-shaped pink to blue-violet flowers in spring; adaptable, but best in rich, moist, well-drained soil.

Siberian Bugloss (*Brunnera macrophylla*)—12-18" high; clump-forming plant with large, heart-shaped leaves; sprays of tiny, blue flowers in spring; prefers rich, moist soil, tolerates drought.

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