

Blooming in the Shade

By Brad Willet, Fairfax Master Gardener Intern

Shady areas of the garden or your landscape can provide much needed rest and respite with the oppressive summer heat. Those are areas of the garden where we can enjoy the time to get out of the sun, cool off, enjoy the day or even the evening. Shady spots in the garden sometimes just feel different. Sometimes they are cooler, sometimes the air seems fresh and this is also the area where there can be lots of color.

Gardening in the shade doesn't have to be a challenge — although I'll admit, it sure can seem like that at times. Oftentimes, shady areas can be under heavy tree canopy, or even those areas in our landscapes that compete with our built-up environment. Either way — there are many great ways to take advantage of this area in our gardens throughout the growing season.

One of the ways that shady gardens can be of additional benefit is that these areas are not as hot since they don't have as much sunshine. However, this doesn't mean that some shady areas aren't particularly dry — they can be. You may also notice some shady areas seem to take longer to dry out after a rain. This could also be an advantage. You may end up saving water and mulching needs. Picking the right plant will greatly facilitate its success in your landscape.



photo: Mississippi State University Extension/Gary Bachman



photo: by author

Virginia Bluebell (*Mertensia virginica*) foreground with Woodland Poppy (*Stylophorum diphyllum*) background

Starting from early spring, your shady areas will likely display more sun as the trees slowly regain their leaf canopy if you have many deciduous trees. This is a great time to have some early spring blooming plants provide some much-needed color and brilliance to your landscape as we come out of winter, not to mention great food resources for native bees.

Ephemeral blooms in the spring would come from the dainty pink hues of Virginia Spring Beauties (*Claytonia virginica*), the uniquely colored Trout Lily (*Erythronium americanum*), and even sweet looks of Virginia Bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*). While each of these grows in early spring, they will all go fully dormant by summer, and it is recommended to add additional blooming plants to the areas to cover the spaces they leave behind. Planting these plants in masses of 3's, 5's or more will make a dynamic view of your spring shady garden and provide those great pops of color after a long winter. Shrubs and small trees that bloom this early in shade would include a

Witch Hazel species (*Hamamelis virginiana*) sending out dainty flowers of yellow with a slightly spicy scent. The tree is rather grown almost like a medium shrub with an open form.

Once spring is in full force, the plants take full advantage of the access to warmth and more sunshine. While plants that are growing in partially shaded areas will benefit from extra light resources, the other plants growing in shade can still put on a show. Your landscape can benefit from flowering plants such as Golden Ragwort (*Packera aurea*) with spikes of yellow daisy-like flowers. Its form has a mass of semi-evergreen rounded leaves that stay well-formed even when the flowers die back. The Woodland Poppy (*Stylophorum diphyllum*) is another yellow bloomer with a low growing habit and almost “oak-like” foliage. The flowers give way to fuzzy seed capsules by summer. Jacob’s Ladder (*Polemonium caeruleum*) and Woodland Phlox (*Phlox divaricata*) add some purple to the



photo: Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology

Jacob's ladder (*Polemonium caeruleum*)

landscape, while white plumes of False Solomon’s Seal (*Maianthemum racemosum*), or the dainty reddish pink of Fire Pink (*Silene virginica*) can add some visual contrast to your shade garden spaces. For something quite unique, perhaps choose Golden Alexander (*Zizia aptera*), Mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*) or even Jack-in-the-Pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*). The Mayapple has a great looking leaf pattern that looks like an outstretched hand with dainty sometimes sweet smelling flowers that wildlife love. The Jack-in-the-Pulpit has a very odd- looking flower that will reveal a cluster of seeds that turn from green to deep red by the fall. Both look a bit otherworldly as if alien species have landed in your garden. They do not disappoint.

As the summer heat comes on, there are many other flowers to choose from to brighten up your shade garden. Whites abound with the spikes of flowers on Black Cohosh (*Actaea racemosa*), Spikenard (*Aralia racemosa*), Virginia Sweetspire (*Itea virginica*), Goat’s Beard (*Aruncus dioicus*), or the star-like Bowman’s Root (*Gillenia trifoliata*), and dainty blooms of the white Wood Aster (*Eurybia divaricata*). Purples and blues come out with the tall Bell Flower (*Campanula americana*), blue Lobelia (*Lobelia siphilitica*), or Mistflower (*Conoclinium coelestinum*). Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) can grow well in shade for a pop of red and distinction and may even attract hummingbirds. For a splash of yellow in the summer garden, Fringed Loosestrife (*Lysimachia ciliata*), Zig Zag Goldenrod (*Solidago flexicaulis*), Woodland Sunflower (*Helianthus divaricatus*) and Narrowleaf Evening Primrose (*Oenothera fruticosa*) could be good choices. Need something a bit more substantial to fill in a space? Oak Leaf Hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*), Bottlebrush Buckeye (*Aesculus parviflora*), and Mountain Laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) can tolerate shadier spots and should not be overlooked.



photo: Vijay Somalinga, North Carolina State Extension

Cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*)

photo: by author



Golden Alexander (Zizia aurea) with a lady beetle

Many of the species listed that bloom in the summer also carry their blooms into the fall. Some notable late summer to fall bloomers in the shade would be White Snakeroot (*Ageratina altissima*), vining native Virginia Clematis (*Clematis virginiana*), Hoary Skullcap (*Scutellaria incana*), and Bigleaf Aster (*Eurybia macrophylla*).

Overall the shade garden is hard to pass up and can be planted with a wide range of flowering plants. Since Victorian times, retreating the summer's heat to the shadier areas of the garden has been a welcome pastime. Adding flowering plants to these areas, especially ones where turf has been challenging to establish, will not only help our pollinator species and wildlife, but add some pops of color to these areas throughout the season. Ideally having blooming plants throughout the growing season is a great way to encourage abundant visitors to your garden. While there are very few

plants that will grow in dense shade, areas that are open to a bit of sunlight during the day or even bright shaded areas will reward you with a great diversity of blooms, colors and enjoyment throughout the season.

Resources

- [Native Plants for Northern Virginia](#), Plant NoVA Natives Campaign
- [Common Native Shrubs and Woody Vines of Virginia](#), Virginia Department of Forestry
- [Selecting Plants for Virginia Landscapes: Showy Flowering Shrubs](#), Virginia Cooperative Extension Publication HORT-84P
- [Native Plants for Conservation, Restoration and Landscaping](#), Virginia Piedmont Region, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation
- [Digital Atlas of the Virginia Flora](#), Virginia Botanical Associates (Database)