

Brighten Up Shady Areas with Colorful Foliage

By Ann M Mason, Fairfax Master Gardener Intern

Gardening in shade challenges every gardener. We define shade as less than four hours of sun, including dappled shade filtered by trees. While there are lots of wonderful green foliage plants for a serene calm garden setting, some of us want to add a bit of color for garden “bling.” What to choose? I searched the recommendations from many gardening experts, and each has their favorite ‘go-to’ plants to add colorful foliage.

At the top of everyone’s list is the native evergreen Coral Bells (*Heuchera americana*) with its low growing habit, beautiful foliage and graceful stalks of pink, red or white flowers in late spring or early summer. There are many cultivars of *H. americana* including ones with green leaves and white margins, or ones with purple or bronze red leaves. Lots of varieties of this wonderful plant genus! Fortunately for gardeners, the Mt. Cuba Center in Delaware released a report of its three-year test trial of 83 cultivars. The Mt. Cuba’s report might just dazzle you to find one that fits your garden. One reason this *Heuchera* carries the common name,



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Heuchera americana coral bells

Alumroot, is its fibrous roots contain the mineral alum, a powerful astringent. Its leaves have a bitter taste because they contain tannin. These characteristics make them unfavored by the nightly parade of deer.

Many gardeners recommend Hosta. With all the various leaf colors and sizes, these are great choices, and I have spent many happy hours looking at them in the garden center. However, my nightly four-legged visitors think that I have planted food for them.

Another plant widely listed by garden experts is dead nettle. Now, I have always considered dead nettle a weed. The weed is purple deadnettle, *Lamium purpureum*, a winter annual that emerges in the fall, flowers and sets seed, which results in aggressive spread. In contrast, what experts recommend for shade is its cousin the prostrate, herbaceous, almost evergreen perennial Spotted Deadnettle, *Lamium maculatum*. Both *Lamium*s are members of the mint family. I have always shied away from this pretty perennial plant



photo: University of Illinois Extension

Japanese grass Hakonechloa

because I confused it with the pretty but insidious weed in my front garden. Given the number of recommendations, I need to reconsider whether *Lamium maculatum* plant might have a place in my shady back yard, especially because it has few pest problems and is not the first choice of deer.

I was pleased to see some of my favorite plants among those recommended. Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa* sp.) has a tidy and graceful leaf with a drooping habit that reminds me of falling water.

With its bright yellow leaves, I planted three clumps under some Cherry Laurel ‘Otto Luyken’ (*Prunus*

laurocerasus) to brighten up the foreground, and this lovely grass accomplished this task beautifully. At the garden center, the interested gardener might be stunned by the price. But this grass is easily divided periodically.

Of course, ferns are the backbone of the shady garden. Japanese Painted Fern (*Athyrium niponicum* 'Pictum') contributes lovely pale cream color with its silvery purple fronds. One of my favorite ferns is the Lady Fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*). I was pleased to read the plant evaluation notes from the Chicago Botanic Garden, Comparative Study of Lady Ferns and Japanese Painted Ferns. Both ferns offer gracious companionship to other shade loving plants if their growth conditions are met — adequate water in well drained soil and partial to full shade.

photo: South Dakota State University



Japanese Painted Fern

Another often recommended plant is Spiderwort or Spider Lily (*Tradescantia*). This is a favorite of mine. I love the graceful yellow leaves that contrast with the purple flowers of *Tradescantia* 'Sweet Kate.' 'Sweet Kate' needs some sun to keep its yellow leaves, so plant this in partial shade. Plant one as a specimen to contrast with your taller green ferns or plants. Or plant 'Sweet Kate' as a group for a real WOW especially when its delicate purple flowers nod above the graceful yellow leaves.

While not a plant with colorful leaves, mass plantings of the native Woodland Phlox, *Phlox divaricata*, brighten up the part to full shade with lavender or violet blooms in April and May. Again Mt. Cuba Center offers gardeners insights with its report of the best performing phlox for shade, including *P. divaricata* 'Blue Moon,' *P. stolonifera*

'Fran's Purple,' *P. stolonifera* 'Home Fires,' *P. stolonifera* 'Pink Ridge,' and *P. stolonifera* 'Sherwood Purple.'

In contrast to commonly recommended plants, I went hunting for something a bit different. Only a few experts recommended Sedges (*Carex spp.*). This grass-like family offers many lovely and colorful options including some with variegated leaves (*Carex morrowii*, with many cultivars) or yellow leaves (*Carex elata* 'Bowles Golden'). Then for partial shade (and sun) there is the semi-evergreen Blood Sorrel (*Rumex sanguineus*) which has medium green leaves with red veins. While some say one can eat this, the leaves contain oxalic acid which can upset one's stomach.

Many of these lower growing plants with colorful leaves become great companions to shade-loving ferns, trees and shrubs. This includes *Hydrangea macrophylla*, which sports mop head flowers that grow on old wood (hint to prune at the



Bloody sorrel, *Rumex sanguineus*

correct time). Give this hydrangea morning sun and dappled afternoon shade for a reliable shrub and companion to plants with colorful foliage.

Resources

[Shade Gardening with Colorful Foliage](#), Chicago Botanic Garden

[Heuchera Report](#), Mt. Cuba Center

[Phlox for Shade Report](#), Mt. Cuba Center

[Tradescantia \(Andersoniana Group\) 'Sweet Kate'](#), Missouri Botanical Garden

[Purple deadnettle \(Lamium purpureum L.\)](#), Michigan State University Extension

[Spotted deadnettle, Lamium maculatum](#), Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin–Madison Extension

[Bloody Dock, Rumex sanguineus](#), Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin–Madison Extension

[Comparative Study of Lady Ferns and Japanese Painted Ferns](#), Richard G. Hawke, Chicago Botanic Garden