

# THE BLESSINGS OF SHADE

*Far from being something a gardener has to put up with, shade should be part of the plan, whether it's the leafy canopy of a single tree, a long pleached allée or a romantic pergola with subtle green shadows*

One delicious Sunday last summer, on a rare day with no obligations, chores or errands, I watched as my husband spent a whole extravagant day in the garden reading. As the sun moved, so did he, always selecting the choicest spot to settle into. A few hours under the big Italian market umbrella on the patio, then down to the pond and a comfortable lounge chair under the leafy canopy of birches, then to a bench in the cool shadows at the edge of our small woodland garden—always following not the sun but the shade.

Shade has gotten a bad reputation in this country. We put up with it, we make the best of it, and sometimes we cut down beautiful old trees to get rid of it. We certainly do not often make shade deliberately. But I think we should. I think that the gardener who deplores the shade should consider it a blessing.

One of the blessings of shade is comfort. As my husband's day-long journey demonstrated, no one wants to curl up with a good book in the glaring sun.

Another blessing is drama: the excitement created by even one shaded area in a sunny garden. A long pergola can do this elegantly. Covered with roses or clematis or wisteria (or all of them—they combine happily), a pergola is more than a design element, more than a way to plant lovely climbers. The shaded space under the romantic structure makes our eyes adjust twice: once as we enter the pergola, again as we leave. And because of this, we experience the brilliance of the sun in a way we would not have without the contrasting darkness.

Few experiences are as compelling as moving down a long shady allée leading to an explosion of bright sun. Sometimes we see this effect when the trees along a country road meet overhead, and it is breathtaking.

You can create a tunnel yourself with pleached trees (woven together overhead) such as hornbeams, lindens or beech. Make the path underneath of moss and near the sides plant occasional swaths of *Lamium* 'White Nancy'. Make the shady path wide enough for two to stroll through side by side, and add a deep, comfortable seat for a refreshing rest along the way. The expectation of cool, restful comfort created by the branches above and the fragrant, subtle green shadows beneath will make the path irresistibly entic-

ing. Especially if it borders a sunny lawn or frames a majestic view.

What else to plant in your carefully created shade? The list is wonderfully long. Shade brings out certain colors more vividly than sun does; bright sun actually seems to drain color. But white, for example, and the palest creamy yellows just sparkle in the shade.

And the plants seem to know when they look their best. So often in nature, shade-loving plants are white. The white flowering dogwoods that dance in the shadows at the edges of our northeastern forests. The evergreen leucothoe with its cascades of fragrant white blossoms. Hosta with its stately wands of white or pale violet bells. *Cimicifuga*, appropriately called fairy candles, with towering, eight-foot-tall spires that seem to hang unsupported under the branches of tall trees.

Following nature's lead almost always makes for good design. While there are many colorful flowering plants that are quite happy in shade, using too many never looks quite right to me. They seem to be trying to deny the shade. I prefer to use the paler flowers and a beguiling variety of leaf textures and colors that enhance the moodiness of shade: Annuals like white nicotiana, white or pale pink impatiens or sweet alyssum to define a shady path like a row of lights; a stand of white cleome or foxglove marking the entrance to an arbor. At the foot of a garden seat a drift of Japanese painted ferns, their pale rose and silver fronds rising from a ground cover of dark, moody European ginger.

Even plants that do require sun to thrive will often flower longer, and without fading, if they receive some shelter from the blistering summer rays: lilies and daylilies, for example, as well as irises, phlox, sedums and peonies.

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I think the attitude that bright, constant sun is desirable (and shade undesirable) is a leftover from our British gardening heritage. I suspect that design traditions in Britain have not explored many methods of modulating the sun simply because they don't often have it—at least not what we Americans would call sun. They garden in a climate that requires them to carry an umbrella everywhere. We carry sunglasses—and still we try to garden the English way.

Sun worship is not good for our health, and it is not always good for our gardens either. ■

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