

GARDENING UNDER TREES

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The southern landscape of old was traditionally shady by necessity, before air conditioning was common. It's still a good idea for those who like to enjoy the outdoors during our hot months, or even to avoid sunlight year round for best skin health.

Shade garden plants can be found in any garden center and offerings have evolved beyond the traditional ferns, hostas, and hydrangeas...and those "common" plants are also now offered in many improved and more beautiful cultivars.

Finding great plants is easy. Establishing a shade garden under large existing trees is the challenge.

Assess the site. Very few plants tolerate full dark shade throughout the entire day. Most older trees have already begun losing lower limbs as those limbs have been shaded out by the upper canopy. As annoying as those falling limbs might be, they have allowed the slanting sun rays of morning and evening to penetrate beneath the tree. Consider hiring a licensed arborist to remove more of them to get a few more hours of sunlight, and perhaps even creating a few openings in the canopy to allow dappled light throughout the day. This may be enough for even turfgrass to succeed if the more shade tolerant forms are selected, and supplied with adequate water.

Water is another significant issue. Trees draw incredible amounts of water from the soil, so competition with the tree's roots is a huge factor. Adequate water must be supplied for successful establishment of shade plants... and beyond.

Adding a few inches of "soil" to the top of the roots will help new plants gain purchase, but here's the rub. Too much coverage will deprive the tree's roots of air exchange and can lead to decline and even the tree's death.

How much soil is too much? A general rule of thumb is to start small. Depending on the tree species (some are particularly sensitive, such as dogwood), no more than one third of the area covered by the tree root zone should be disturbed. Remaining areas can be developed over time, as the tree adjusts to the changes. Remember that tree roots extend at least to the canopy, and usually beyond.

Use fluffy soils, not heavy clay. Best would be good loam mixed with some sort of compost, be it gin trash, decomposed sawdust, leaf mold, finely ground bark, etc. Two to three inches is not going to bother the tree if it is a good porous mix. Yes, dig a bit into the existing roots, but not deeply, and do not cut through roots larger than an inch or a bit more. If you need to bring soil up a few inches to cover individual plants' root balls, that will not harm the tree. Buy small plants to minimize this digging. You don't want to be digging 5 gallon holes!

Do NOT fertilize at all for at least one year. Use a good organic mulch that will break down and add fertility. Fertilizer at time of establishment creates salty conditions and stress. When plants are well established, you may fertilize lightly, but in the long run, improving the soil gradually with layers of organic materials will help plants flourish. This is exactly what happens in the wild, as the leaves fall in autumn and decompose to form the next layer of rich soil. This decomposing layer of leaf litter, twigs

and bark is called duff, and as it enriches soil, it also cools the root zone, allows good air exchange, conserves moisture and encourages the growth of beneficial mycorrhizae (good fungae that help the roots obtain more water and nutrient). Imitating this natural cycle creates a successful shade garden with the least effort. In the future, fall leaves can be blown into the beds to act as natural mulch and will continue to improve the soil.

Consider having simple paths of stones, mulch or gravel through the shade beds or use moss. Moss can also be used as a floor or “lawn” in the shady landscape. The key is to keep the moss free of leaves. If you don’t like a noisy blower, invest in a lightweight bamboo rake - but it is not effective on a heavy leaf cover especially if allowed to get wet. Weeding is done by hand or by very light applications of glyphosate at a reduced rate, repeated as needed.

Plants for shade outside “the usual”.

- Alabama croton
- Aralia ‘Sun King’
- Unusual native azaleas such as swamp azalea (*R. viscosum*) or plumleaf (*R. prunifolium*)
- Variegated common boxwood
- Bugbane (*Cimicifuga*)
- Hardy begonia
- Carex ‘Everillo’
- Dwarf golden sweet flag
- Farfugium (leopard bane)
- Fatshedera (cross between *Fatsia* and *Hedera* (English Ivy))
- Hardy palms such as needle palm, Chinese windmill palm, and palmetto
- Roof iris
- *Kolkwitizia* ‘Dream Catcher’
- Paperbush (*Edgeworthia*)
- Peedee Ingot liriopse