

Color in Summer Shade

Someone famous, whose name escapes me, said the loveliest phrase in the English language was “summer afternoon.” Even more evocative I think is “summer afternoon in the shade.” The desire for color and the need for shade are not mutually exclusive. If you have the great grandeur of an old Southern Magnolia, be grateful for the cool beneath it and move your plants nearer to the drip-line. There are lots of choices for the small trees that thrive between the large trees and the lawn and provide cooling, dappled shade.

Deciduous trees include the Eastern redbud (*Cercis Canadensis*), White fringe tree (*Chionanthus virginicus*), Serviceberry (*Amelanchier*), and Stewartia. These offer spring color in flower and fall color in leaf. Later blooming is the Kousa dogwood which has red berries following the summer blooms.

If you have space available, flowering shrubs can be inter-planted with the small trees. Many tolerate some shade and bloom well especially when shredded leaves, well-rotted cow manure and compost is added to the site. Summersweet or Sweet pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*) ‘Pink Spires’ blooms in summer so provide color when the familiar spring blooming azaleas and mountain laurel are finished.

The cut-leaf Japanese maples shrub-size trees, are so elegant in leaf and line they brighten the landscape without flowers. They grow in dappled shade as does the small Magnolia stellata which blooms in April. Almost indispensable for color in summer shade is the well-loved hydrangea.

When we speak of growing them in shade, we do not suggest growing them in the dark. They need some light to flower well. Good-enough soil suits them: too much nitrogen will give you lush leaves at the expense of flowers.

We expect acid soil to produce blue flowers in this species and alkaline soil to produce pink ones. In some hydrangeas, the bloom starts out pale with pink tones and eventually turns blue. Technically, it is not the acid that makes them blue but the fact that in acid soil the aluminum is made available to the plant’s roots. In alkaline soil, the aluminum is not converted to a form the hydrangea can absorb so the flowers are pink. If you have a bush that used to be pink, was purple for a while and is now blue it is because the natural pH shift has occurred as organic material, such as mulch, has decomposed, making the soil more acidic.

Modern breeding has given us hydrangeas which keep their intended color despite the soil they are in. For example, if you have a shady place that needs the light of white, there is H. ‘Annabelle’ with puffy, profuse white mop heads. For brilliant fall color, the oakleaf hydrangeas are valuable.

For many of us, the perennials which were in shade are now in the blazing sun and asking to be tucked under a bit of shade someplace. For those with lots of trees, there are many, many perennials that give color to shade. From early spring Bleeding Heart to late summer N.Y. ironweed, the list is extensive. For moist shade, nothing is prettier than Astilbe. They come short to tall, white to deep purple and all the pinks between Begonias, both the large and elegant tuberous ones and the wax begonias, some of which are hardy here, explode with color all summer. Just because you see so many of them, is no reason not to have Impatiens with their willingness to bloom their heads off in the same color spectrum as begonias.

Ground covers are attractive where there is not sun enough for a lawn.

English ivy (*Hedera helix*) escapes and strangles things so it is best kept on your kitchen windowsill. Periwinkle (*Vince*) and wintercreeper (*Euonymus fortunei*) have to be monitored. Periwinkle will stay outside and is easily pulled up but the wintercreeper can make its way to the rafters in the garage.

Pachysandra is well-behaved, moving about slowly and Cotoneaster thrives in both sun and shade and comes in various modes. For dry shade nothing is more elegant than barrenwort, bishop's hat (*Epimedium*). It is not invasive at all but it survives: the few wisps of it that I have are 30 years old. The small heart-shaped leaves are on wiry stems so they dance a bit and the tiny yellow flowers do indeed look like hats.