

Shade Loving Perennials

It was a long, cold, snowy winter. If you are like me, you are anxious to get back out into your garden. My property, like many of yours, is heavily shaded. Only my curbside gets sun all day. Flower beds on my property are under the canopy of oaks, basswoods, yellowwood, hornbeam and redbud.

Although I long to plant sun-loving perennials, I know from past experience they do not thrive. But shade perennials love my garden. Plant the right perennial in the right location – shade perennials for shady gardens – and you will have great success. You don't need sun-loving perennials to have a beautiful garden. Many of our native perennials are happiest under tree canopies. Some perennials grow well in the sun but tolerate shade; others must be in shade to thrive.

Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria Canadensis*) and wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) are in the process of taking over my flowerbeds. Both are jumping across grassy walkways to new locations. Mayapples (*Podophyllum peltatum*) double in quantity each year. Twinleaf (*Jeffersonia diphylla*) with butterfly-shaped double leaves, is multiplying and relocating willy-nilly in all directions. Their true sign of happiness is the yearly spread of new perennials.



False Solomon's Seal



Brunnera with Foxglove and Sweet Woodruff

I encourage you not to give up on your shady garden. A shade garden can be very beautiful. Non-native, non-invasive shade perennials that do no harm, can add extra flare to a shade garden. Just think of hosta. *Hosta fortunei*, *Hosta lancifolia*

and green and white *Hosta undulata* are old garden favorites I inherited with my ninety year old property. I've added other interesting varieties such as *Hosta 'Sum and Substance'* with giant seersucker blue-green leaves; *Hosta 'Cheatin Heart'* with small deep-gold leaves; and *Hosta tardiana 'June'* with variegated green and yellow leaves. A trip to your local nursery is in order to investigate the many varieties available.

When adding non-natives to your garden, also think beyond hosta to April blooming Siberian brunnera (*Brunnera*

macrophylla) and lungwort (*Pulmonaria*); May blooming Lady's mantle (*Alchemilla mollis*); European ginger (*Asarum europaeum*); *Epimedium x rubrum* and *x youngianum 'Niveum'*; June blooming astilbe; and July blooming ligularia. All of these splendid perennials would do well in a shade garden.

Some of our native perennials bloom before our trees leaf out. Bloodroot blooms early in mid-April and twinleaf blooms in late

May. Their tiny white flowers are gone in a twinkling. A bit of wind or rain, and their petals will fall. Our native bleeding hearts, squirrel corn (*Dicentra Canadensis*) and Dutchman's-breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*), bloom in early April. Dutchman's-breeches will continue to bloom well into June.

White trillium (*Trillium grandiflorum*) holds its blooms for weeks from late April to June. Foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*) blooms from early May to June, and Western bleeding heart (*Dicentra Formosa*) blooms from late May to July. Bunchberry (*Cornus Canadensis*) blooms from late May to mid-June. And don't forget heuchera blooming from mid-June right through to September. I've often seen heuchera listed as a "sun" perennial, but I've found it to be very happy even in deep shade in my garden.

False Solomon's seal (*Smilacina racemosa*) blooms from mid-May to early June and then surprises us with lovely red berries remaining well into fall. Wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*) blossoms nod brightly on their stalks from late May into June. And then Goatsbeard (*Aruncus dioicus*) sends up a tall rocket spray of white feathery blossoms later in the season, from early June into July.

And let's not forget the fern family. Ferns are a treasure trove for shade gardeners. I especially like to use lady fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*), Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) and non-native but lovely variegated-leaved Japanese painted fern (*Athyrium goeringianum*) in my garden. I've found these three ferns to be very hardy and easy to grow.



Bunchberry with ferns

As summer progresses, you will have fewer flowering perennials in a shade garden. But a shade garden can still be attractive if you use interesting combinations of perennials. Even without a single bloom, a thoughtful mix of plant sizes and leaf sizes, shapes, textures and colors will add punch to your garden.

Using large, small and medium-sized perennials grouped together creates interest, much like having three differently sized and shaped items on your living room coffee table. Remember the 1, 3, 5 rule. One large hosta, three medium-sized heuchera, and many smaller-leaved, ground-hugging wild gingers make an interesting grouping. Even a garden filled only with different varieties of hosta would be interesting if you combine their different overall sizes, leaf shapes, textures and colors.

Perennials with different-shaped leaves create interest: a giant blue-green hosta mixed with three petite, chartreuse, lance-leaved hostas, plus the feathery light leaves of lady ferns make a charming grouping. When you think of perennials that you already have in your garden, think of their overall size and shape, their leaf sizes and textures. Could you rearrange perennials you already have in your garden to make them more interesting?

The seersucker look of *Hosta sieboldiana* 'Blue Angel' or 'Sum and Substance'; the curly, wrinkly leaves of heuchera; and the



Foamflower with Dicentra

kidney-shaped, smooth velvety leaves of native ginger (*Asarum canadense*) or the shiny round leaves of European ginger (*Asarum europaeum*) create unique textures in the shade garden.

Perennials with unusually colored leaves or colorful striations within their leaves add punctuation when nothing is in bloom. Two of my favorites are lungwort *Pulmonaria saccharata* 'British Sterling' and 'Mrs. Moon'. No shade garden is complete without lungwort. Not only are their magenta-blue flowers lovely from April to June, their large spotted oval leaves add character all summer long. *Brunnera macrophylla* with tiny blue flowers from late April through June continues to add interest to the garden all season long because of its large variegated white and green leaves.

Many garden perennials have yellow, white or even burgundy mixed in with the green of their leaves. White and pale colored details on perennial leaves attract our attention and create an illusion of light in our gardens. Perennials like heuchera come in myriad colors, from orange to purple and mixes of colors too many to be believed, a regular smorgasbord of color. More hybrid varieties become available each year. Buy three – they're small! Enjoy your shade garden.

🌿 Beth Schroeder
ALL PHOTOS: BETH SCHROEDER

It's Only Two Months Away!

New Multi-Event Celebration at Nahanton Park on June 6 • 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Everyone is Welcome! Bring your friends and neighbors, too!

Come to enjoy this park, which includes riverfront, community garden plots, meadows, wooded hillsides, wild blackberry bushes, wetlands, a pond, and a plateau overlooking the river valley.

Enjoy talking with other Conservators and learning from our board members and advisors.
Bring your lunch to picnic with others. We will provide beverages and ice cream.

- Bird Walks • Fishing Tournament • Canoe and Kayak Tours • Introduction to Native Plants
- Fern Walk led by Don Lubin • Walk to meet the Trees of Nahanton Park
- Invasive Plant Pull • Scavenger Hunt for Children

Check our website listing in May for specific times for each event.