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Shade Gardening

While shade in the garden can appear frustrating, a good approach when dealing with this facet of gardening is to consider the lack of direct light an asset. It is cooling, and inviting, and provides a useful retreat during the warmest times of the year. In shaded areas, it is important to consider the shade density and how the shade impacts the soil throughout each of the seasons.

Planning and Planting in the Shade

Shaded areas are generally the last to thaw in spring and maintain moisture inconsistently. Be sure to plant by calculating the longevity of snow throughout the spring, as well as for the moisture retention throughout summer. Plants are often labeled with their sunlight preferences, water requirements, and their predominant growth and bloom periods. After planting, side-dress the plants with mulch to evenly distribute moisture.

Type 1: Dappled and Light Shade

This includes areas under light tree cover, areas that receive direct sunlight for ½ of the day, or areas that dry out more readily. This type is also referred to as Dry Shade or Partial Sun. This can be the optimal area for a variety of plants, including those that like to identify as “Full Sun” but have thicker leaves. Exa

mples include Sedum, Centranthus (Jupiter’s Beard), Leucanthemum (Daisy), Campanula, Peony, Clematis, and Columbine.

Type 2: Open to Medium Shade

This type of shade is generally more consistent due to location, for example, an area shaded by a wall or fence or under consistent tree coverage. The air is open and cool, and the soil is not dried out due to sunlight exposure. These areas may receive direct sunlight for about ¼ of the day. Plants labeled “Partial Shade” will do very well here. Examples include Cerastium (Snow in Summer), Columbine, Hydrangeas, Delphinium, Veronica, Boxwoods, Lupines, and even Raspberries!

Type 3: Dense Shade

The quality of the light found in these areas is dense and dark. It is often underneath large trees, tall walls, and fences. There are often tree roots or excessive amounts of moisture in the soil, this makes available nutrients inaccessible. These areas may need soil amendment and reoccurring fertilization. These areas are the last to thaw in spring, making early bloomers (bulbs, fruit bearers, and vines) less successful. Look for shallow-rooted, dense shade plants, that bloom late in the year. Examples include Hostas, Heuchera, Aegopodium (Bishops Weed), Lysimachia (Creeping Jenny), Plumbago, Anemone (Windflower), Ajuga, Mint, and Elderberry. Consider the use of the area- if it is rarely viewed or irrigated consider decorative mulch, containers filled with shade annuals, or a seating area to cool off in summer.