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Landscape and IRRIGATION

SEPTEMBER 2008

Success Among the Shadows

Overcoming the challenges
of a shady landscape

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By Leslie Kirk and Don Eberly

Success Among the Shadows

Overcoming the challenges
of a shady landscape

Kong Coleus 'Red' and Wizard Coleus 'Mosaic'
Images on this page courtesy of Ball Horticultural Company

'Chocolate Mint' Coleus



Fanfare Spreading 'Bright Coral'



Professional landscapers often view shade as one of the most difficult challenges to address without blowing too much time (and the budget). But a successful, low-maintenance landscape can be achieved merely by understanding shady conditions and staying up to date on available plant material that can contend with the various levels of moisture, temperature and soil condition that commonly deter plant growth in low-lighted areas.

One of the greatest benefits to landscapers in recent years is the fact that leading industry breeders and growers have noticed a growing interest from consumers in shade gardening. Thus, horticulturists such as Dan Heims, president of Terra Nova Nurseries, and his laboratory team, have specifically directed attention to cultivating new plants for shade. The result has encompassed the introduction of a wide range of shade plants with bold colors and unique textures rarely thought possible in these areas.

Even plants suitable for the most difficult shade environments — including the shallow soil and filtered light frequently found under trees — are currently in development. Fran Hopkins, founder of the Stepables brand of creeping perennials, has dedicated a good deal of energy the last couple of years to educating landscape professionals about low-growing groundcovers and creepers that serve as a solution plant under these extreme conditions. According to Hopkins, knowledge of essential and robust shade varieties is key to reducing plant replacement.

Before delving directly into the colors and textures of the design or installation, the landscaper should keep in mind the basics of light properties and behavior.

Understanding shade basics

Analyzing the amount of shade in each area of the landscape is always the first step to creating an installation plan. Asking a series of applicable questions and taking notes during a walk-through of the site — at varied times of the day — is a beneficial means of gathering advanced insight. Are there established trees around which plants or turf will need to be planted and maintained? Are there buildings or other structures that block light for a few hours a day or impede all morning light? Does the design plan call for additional trees to be brought in, consequently creating more shade in areas presently with sun exposure?

The landscaper may then want to analyze the degrees of shade throughout areas that will require planting (see sidebar on page 29 for tips on how to determine degrees of shade). Keep in mind that once a landscape is established and has had a chance to mature, medium or heavy shade may develop in areas originally planted for light or dappled shade. In an area such as this, where a mature plant is expected to alter light conditions, consider choosing varieties that will succeed in most any degree of shade, such as hostas, heucheras or ferns. “The various levels of light may ultimately determine which plants will be the most successful and require the least amount of long-term maintenance,” said Heims.

After determining the square footage and levels of shade at the site, the landscape planner can then begin selecting varieties that will capitalize on space, budget and time — all while using design principals that will produce a striking and polished final look and style.

Most growers, like Heims and Hopkins, are quite willing to discuss specific conditions with landscape contractors and managers to help determine the most advantageous lineup of plants based upon need. The union of knowledge between landscaper and grower can enable synergistic results, yielding a successful and long-lasting shade bed, border or other area.



Ajuga 'Chocolate Chip' — Photo courtesy of Stepables

Ambiance matters

Plants that thrive in shade are only successful if the final result meets the design standards set forth by the client's wants and needs. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the differences between a shady and sunny landscape design, and how colors and textures of shade plants will need to be carefully chosen to create the appropriate ambiance. Preferences and knowledge of shade plants are advancing, so it is possible clients will already have set opinions.

Landscapers traditionally advocate a calming design concept for low-light areas because shade-tolerant live goods are most commonly available in color variations of blues, violets, browns and deep reds. If this is the goal of the customer, it is best to use strong textural contrasts for supplemental interest where desired. A mix of matte and velvet-like foliage may be best for this model, with combinations of smooth and serrated edges. Plant colors such as silver, chocolate, auburn, russet, toffee and deep green will also add to this soothing atmosphere and develop a sense of design diversity.

If the shade area is expected to blend seamlessly with the sunny areas surrounding it, the use of colorful flowers and glossy foliage in unison creates a flowing combination. This approach is often achieved by choosing lighter colors such as yellows, white, pinks and bright reds. Although vibrant and vivid colors are less common in



Sagina 'Aurea' — Photo courtesy of Stepables

shade plants, many are cultivated with high-level genetics to tackle the need. Plant series such as Dragon Wing Begonias deliver abundant, bright blooms even in shade and were cultivated for this particular purpose by Ball Horticultural Company. Plants such as these are made for the shade and are available in multiple colors and provide excellent, season-long performance.

Evoke a sense of depth by placing bright, large-leaf foliage in deep, heavy-shade areas. This will brighten the darkest spots in the landscape and allow for bolder, complementary colors in front — ultimately extending the space. Unifying unlikely color partners such as the one provided by pairing 'Chocolate Mint' Coleus with the chartreuse foliage of Wizard Coleus will draw admiring attention through contrast. In fact, by selecting two coleuses, these plants will not compete for resources and the color design will remain eye-catching and rich.

“Keeping these design concepts in mind, plant selection for the shade may become one of the more preferred planning conversations with clients,” said Hopkins.

Think outside the box

Landscapers tend to revert back to the basics when planting for shade, but thinking outside the box can bring new bursts of color, texture and interest into the landscape that go well beyond the norm. Understanding the extent of plant materials now available can also maximize budgets and reduce long-term maintenance.

“One of the most intriguing shade varieties being introduced to the market this year is Heuchera 'Plum Royale,’” said Heims. “This herbaceous perennial has remarkable color, remaining a deep, shiny-purple throughout summer and turning stunning silver with purple tint in winter.” Plants with year-round interest may help minimize cost by diminishing the necessity of substituting plants each season. Other suggestions for four-season color and textural interest include the variegated foliage and bright-pink blooms of Bergenia 'Lunar Glow' and the fuzzy texture of Begonia 'Curly Fireflush'.

Choosing perennials with a clumping habit can also help cut overall costs. For example, pulmonarias spread quickly, and mature specimens can be divided so plants may be re-used and multiplied without having to purchase additional plant material. Try Pulmonaria 'Bubble Gum', which sports a dense, flowering habit and silver-spotted leaves that develop in a compact, mounding form. In fact, many shade plants boast naturally larger leaves in order to maximize photosynthesis, so search for clumping varieties of this size and fewer plants will be needed to fill a large space.

Undertaking under-plantings

Unfortunately, finding plants tolerant of shade is not the only problem that must be addressed when planting in shady areas. Other problems — such as excess moisture, lack of nutrients, and difficulty with maintenance — can occur in areas with little to no direct sunlight.

Under trees, shade plants must often compete for nutrients and moisture, causing landscapers to lean toward mulching to avoid losing product. Low-growing creeping perennials can provide a solution of color and style to an area typically left bare. “Creeping perennials can be a real money-saver and a handsome addition if selected appro-



Left: Heuchera 'Plum Royale' Right: Bergenia 'Lunar Glow' — Photos courtesy of Terra Nova Nurseries

privately,” said Hopkins. “Plants such as Ajuga ‘Chocolate Chip’ make excellent under-plantings around trees because the roots are extremely shallow, and the plant will thrive even under stressful and shady conditions.”

Low-growing creepers and groundcovers may also be the perfect turf substitute for shady areas, because mowing and other forms of maintenance can become difficult if the shade is derived from multiple trees and tall plantings. Creeping perennials generally do not grow above a few inches and naturally deter weeds.

Plants must also contend with poor air circulation in heavily shaded areas, making plants stay wet longer and diseases more prevalent. To avoid problems that can occur with “wet feet,” try planting hardy impatiens. Series such as Fanfare Spreading Impatiens are cultivated to rebound quickly from water stress without shedding buds or blooms. Impatiens are also extremely vigorous, making them less susceptible to shade-related diseases.

A sigh of relief

Landscape professionals may cringe when approached with a project that is predominantly shady or has several difficult shady beds. But with the appropriate knowledge base, these landscapes do not have to allow plant choices to eat away at profit or time.

With the ability to proactively manage the problems that may arise with shade, and the unique plants that have been bred to overcome them, designing and managing an area that is covered in different variations of light can become an enjoyable, profitable challenge. **■**

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For more information about the sources in this article and hundreds of plants for shade, visit www.ballhort.com, www.terravanurseries.com or www.stepables.com.

Degrees of Shade

Light shade: Areas in which there is still a good deal of indirect sunlight, possibly only shaded for a few hours each day.

Dappled shade: Areas often found under immature trees or other smaller or mid-size plantings, where sun shines through — but sporadically — leaving blotchy areas of sun and shade.

Partial/medium shade: Direct sunlight is rarely present throughout the day, but may occur for a few hours in morning or evening.

Full/deep shade: Sunlight is rarely, if ever, seen in these areas.

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greener**

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