

SHADE PLANT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST



What grows well in the shade? That's a question we commonly field from our Portland landscaping clients. Here in the Portland metro area, different communities see different weather patterns, different soil compositions, and slightly different growing conditions. What does well in a shady Lake Oswego yard may not survive in a shady backyard in Hillsboro. Landscaping depends on multiple inputs, from soil condition to light patterns. Each yard also has its own microclimates influencing growth. As such, there is no simple answer to the shade question. Every yard has its own unique growing conditions, which may or may not support the requirements of specific shady plants. Speaking with a landscaping expert can give you insight into the type of plants that will thrive in your yard.

Landscape East & West has specialists on hand to help you with plant choice. Here are a few considerations that our experts factor into shade species selection.

Light patterns—Generally, landscapers categorize plants into several categories of light exposure: Full sun, partial sun, partial shade, and full shade.

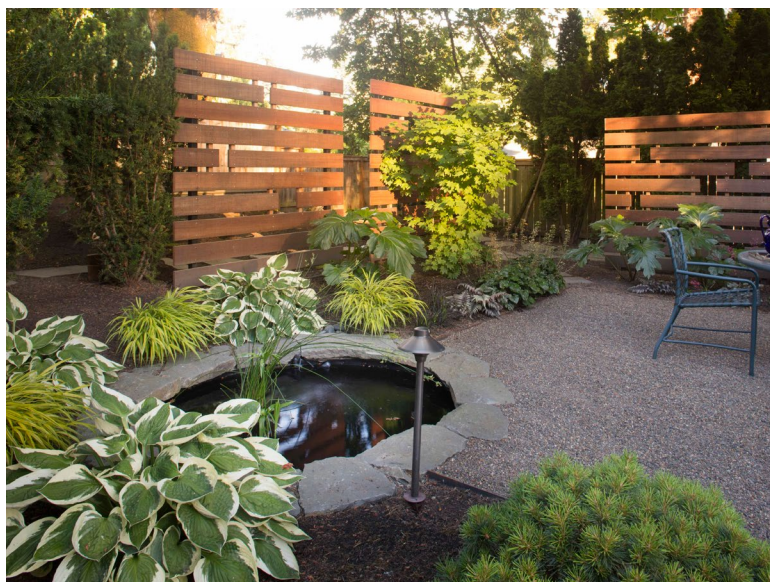
Full sun: Needs at least six hours of sunlight per day.

Partial sun: Requires three to six hours of sun per day.

Partial shade: Also needs three to six hours of sun per day, ideally direct morning sun with shade in the afternoon.

Full shade: Needs less than three hours of sun per day.

Oftentimes, plants' coloring reflects their shade preferences. White or cream-colored flora does well in shade; gold or purple foliage will need sun.





Hardiness Zone.

A shady plant that's not listed for your hardiness zone will not thrive. Portland generally falls into [USDA hardiness zone 8b](#), with low temperatures between 15 and 20 degrees Fahrenheit, on average. Some areas—such as inner Portland—are in zone 9a, as the average lows they see are from 20 to 25 degrees Fahrenheit. However, geography affects temperatures and hardiness zones significantly, so you should also consider where you live. A valley will see different temperature patterns than a hilltop, for instance. Each plant tag should list a hardiness zone to help you make smart landscaping choices.

Soil composition.

In general, shade gardening requires richer soil, so that plants can get all of the nutrients they require. Consider a shady forest floor: It has inches of accumulated leaves, pine needles, and other detritus to feed plants. Similarly, a successful yard shade garden will have rich, quick-draining soil. With that said, each shade plant has its own soil preferences, so research species on an individual basis and amend soil accordingly.

Seasonal shade.

Some species, such as maple and oak, are free of leaves from November through April, creating a winter sunny zone where summer shade once dominated. Pay attention to how the light changes on your property throughout the year, and plant with these patterns in mind.

Water conditions.

Oftentimes, plants that adapted to shady conditions have shallow roots, which allow them to absorb nutrients from the surface leaf litter. These plants also suck up surface water before it trickles down to the deep taproots of canopy plants. Overall, shade plants often need less water than their full-sun counterparts. However, there are some shade species that prefer dry soil, while others like it wet. Again, it's best to [talk to an expert](#) or do your research to see what specific plants need.

Mature plant height.

Research each plant's mature size prior to purchase. Is there room for the mature plant in your intended spot?

Maintenance.

Will you be able to maintain the shade plant when it is fully grown? What pruning will be required? Also consider any leaves or fallen blossoms that require extensive clean up.

As you can see, plant selection is no easy task, regardless of the degree of shade. Thorough research is needed for every new planting. With that in mind, let's take a look at some shady plants that will do well in specific circumstances.

Shady Plants for Specific Purposes



Sarcococca hook. var. humilis

Shade Loving Shrubs:

- *Sarcococca hook. var. humilis* – Known familiarly as Sweet Box, *Sarcococca* can grow to five feet in height and six feet in width. It produces white, tubular flowers in the spring and shiny black fruits in the summer.
- *Hydrangeas*. Enjoy pink, purple, or blue balls of blossoms, depending on your soil's acidity.
- *Full- or Partial-Shade Rhododendrons*. If you love spectacular blossoms in the spring and glossy green leaves in the winter, rhododendrons are an excellent shrub choice. Most rhododendrons do best with filtered sunlight; some light is needed to help them produce strong buds.
- *Snowberry*. This native plant produces striking white berries.

Tall Plants for Shady Areas:

- *Hydrangeas*. Their lush foliage and lovely ball-shaped blossoms come back year after year.
- *Solomon's Seals* can provide height at the rear of a shady garden bed.

Adding Color to Shady Areas:

Are you looking for year-round color? There are two approaches to take: 1. Create a brighter palette of flowers, often annuals that require seasonal replacement, or 2. Choose less vibrant plantings that can continue growing all year long. For ease of maintenance, we recommend creating a range of colors by selecting plants with striking leaf tones. For instance, pink frost changes its colors in winter. Evergreen ferns add texture, height, and dark green tones to the garden, 365 days a year. Columbines and impatiens will add color pops to the shade garden as well.

Directly Under Trees:

Trees with numerous small roots near the soil surface may

be difficult to garden beneath without harming the tree. Birches, beeches, willows, and locusts are a few species that fall into this category. Douglas fir and western red cedar provide a different problem: blocked winter rainfall. Finally, some native trees, such as madrones and white oaks, suffer when watered in the summer, so water-hungry plants should not be placed within their drip line. (Otherwise, you may harm the tree when attempting to water plants beneath it.) For these areas, we recommend drought-tolerant species such as bishop's hat (*Epimedium*), sword fern, and hardy cyclamen. Aside from these examples, the dappled sunlight beneath most trees generally creates a wonderful growing environment for shade plants.

Some of our favorite shady species are...



Saxifraga 'Primuloides'

An excellent ground cover for deep shade.



Brunnera macrophylla 'Jack Frost'

A classic perennial for shade zones; enjoy its frosted appearance and airy blue spring blossoms resembling forget-me-nots.



Hosta fortunei 'Aureomarginata'

This hosta will 'Aureomarginata' do well in all soil conditions. Its leaves are olive green in the center, and yellow on the edges. It offers stalks of lavender flowers in the spring.



Polystichum polyblepharum

Known commonly as Tassel Fern, this species brings an elegant look to shady zones.



Polygonatum odoratum Variegatum

This variegated Solomon's Seal has eye-catching white streaks on its leaves. We love the white flowers this variety produces, as well as its black autumn fruit and yellowing autumn leaves.



Aucuba japonica 'Variegata'

The common name, Gold Dust Plant, says it all. Its glossy green leaves are spattered with yellow. We love that it takes well to pruning, and that it can be planted near tree roots.

Classic Flowering Portland Shade Plants include...

- *Hostas*. They are a perennial that will come back year after year to create a lush feel in your yard. They are kind to tree roots because they don't require frequent dividing.
- *Astilbes*. With their long, feathery flowers that dry out during the fall, astilbes provide yearlong visual interest. Bonus: They make excellent cut flowers.
- *Hellebores*. Many Portland green thumbs select hellebores for winter color. Hellebores begin blooming sometime between December and February, and they retain their flowers through spring.
- *Heucheras* (AKA *Coral Bells*). We love their wide array of leaf tones, from lime green (in the "Electric Lime" heuchera) to caramel red (the "Southern Comfort" coral bell variety).
- *Cyclamen*. They are one of the few flowering plants that will grow in dry shade.

Selecting Shade Plants for Hillsboro Homes

If you live in Hillsboro or the Willamette Valley, shade plants that work in the Cascades or the Coast range may not grow in your yard. Here are a few shade plants that typically grow well in the Hillsboro area:

- *Variegated Winter Daphne* (*Daphne odora* 'Aureomarginata'). Enjoy this evergreen shrub's fragrant blossoms in the winter and early spring. Does well in dappled shade near a deck or patio, where you'll have a chance to enjoy its delightful aroma.
- *Papyrus* (*Cyperus papyrus* 'Dwarf Form'). Also known as "Tutankhamun" or "Nanus," this smaller version of papyrus grass grows 2-3 feet tall and is shade tolerant.
- *Red Huckleberry* (*Vaccinium parvifolium*) is a large, deciduous native shrub that produces creamy bell-shaped flowers in the spring and summer, and red berries to feed wildlife.
- *Lady Fern* (*Athyrium filix-femina*) is a native, deciduous fern that is perfect for shady rain gardens.



Before Planting: Talk to an Expert.

Why waste money on plants that will only die in the wrong environment? We recommend speaking with a professional green thumb before planting your shade garden. Here at Landscape East & West, we offer free estimates and innovative solutions to your toughest garden zones.

If you are averse to spending your weekends on maintenance, call us for landscaping services. Hillsboro to Happy Valley, we can provide turnkey landscaping, including design, planting, and ongoing maintenance. Trouble spots in your yard are no trouble for us—we can recommend replacing a perpetually soggy lawn with water-loving ground covers. Or, depending on your goals, we might suggest trading out a failing shade garden with hardscaping. The bottom line is that your shady zones will be attractive and well cared for with Landscape East & West on your side.



About the Author:

Steve Stewart is the Owner/President of Landscape East & West, award-winning Portland landscaping professionals. He oversees the day-to-day operations of the company. Landscape East & West is a leader in the Portland Metropolitan area in creating unique

landscape designs and executing expert construction and maintenance with care and pride.