



SL11

DRY SHADE STRATEGIES

By following a few simple guidelines,
you can create a diverse and colorful
garden. C. Colston Burrell

Every garden has a dry, shady spot where it looks as though nothing will survive. But looks can be deceiving. There is a whole host of interesting and attractive plants that will not only survive in the heavy shade of a tall building or full tree canopy, but actually thrive there, contending with root competition and summer gloom to bring you flowers and decorative foliage all through the year.

The first point to recognize is that much dry shade is not permanently shady, or permanently dry. Of course most wooded sites become dry in summer, as the trees block out not only light but also rain. Thirsty tree roots, moreover, quickly swallow up whatever does get through to ground level, so herbaceous plants and shrubs must then make do with leftovers. But at other times of the year neither water nor light may be in particularly short supply, and this is the key to survival for a number of good garden plants.

In a forest, for example, deciduous trees allow considerable light to stream through bare branches in spring and autumn. Soil moisture is ample at the beginning and end of the season. Here, early-blooming bulbs and wildflowers excel. As the canopy leafs out and competition for limited moisture intensifies, these plants retreat.

Conditions under a wide-spreading lawn tree or in a suburban woodlot are similar to those in a forest, and so are the plants that like them. More challenging are plantings under conifers. Their shallow roots and dense canopy ensure that light and water are hard to come by anytime; yet again nature shows you what will grow there. In pine and hemlock forests, plants with evergreen leaves are the most common understory elements. Evergreen leaves help a plant cope with a difficult site in two ways: first, they allow it to produce food whenever temperatures are above 45 degrees F, and second, their leathery texture substantially reduces water loss. So for a garden spot with year-round shade, evergreen plants are the wisest choice.

Dealing with Dry Soil

Shaded spots are dry either because not enough moisture reaches the soil or because the soil won't hold it. Or both. There are various strategies for dealing with dry soil, but the simplest is to ignore it and choose plants adapted to drought. This process may involve a

shift in expectations on the gardener's part, since a dry shade garden will never be as lush as a creekside planting. But you can still create a beautiful and satisfying display.

If you must tinker, the best cure for dry soil is organic matter, lots of it. Applying it can be tricky. Dense roots often make digging impossible, and root disturbance may damage or kill a tree. Besides, mature tree roots often work their way above the ground surface. Yet you can with care cover them, building up enough soil depth for planting and increasing the water-holding capacity. Add light mulch or composted manure gradually, layer by layer, giving the trees time to adjust. Never dump heavy soil onto tree roots; burying them this way may cause permanent damage.

Where roots are not too closely knit, you can work organic matter further down into the soil. As you dig, avoid cutting large roots. Small roots severed by the shovel's blade will quickly regrow. Some trees, especially early successional species like most maples and

OPPOSITE:

Many spring-blooming bulbs and perennials will flourish under the skirts of deciduous trees and shrubs (here a foxtailgilla), making their show before the woody plants leaf out. The woody plants can then carry on the show.

Hardy cyclamen, *Cyclamen hederifolium*,

shows its flowers first, then the marbled leaves.





COMBINATIONS FOR YEAR-ROUND BEAUTY

A hypothetical planting plan created by the author blends bulbs, perennials, and shrubs to provide four-season variety of shapes, textures, and colors—from both flowers and foliage (Plants shown in profile at right).

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| <p>1. Callaway wild ginger
<i>Asarum shuttleworthii</i> 'Callaway'</p> | <p>8. Long-eared holly fern <i>Polystichum neolobatum</i>
Interplanted with 12 <i>Leucojum vernum</i></p> |
| <p>2. White wood aster <i>Aster divaricatus</i>
Interplanted with 12 <i>Narcissus</i> 'February Gold'</p> | <p>9. White-edged variegated sacred lily
<i>Rohdea japonica</i>
Interplanted with 24 <i>Galanthus</i> spp.</p> |
| <p>3. Evergold Sedge <i>Carex oshimensis</i> 'Evergold'</p> | <p>10. Saruma <i>Saruma henryi</i>
Interplanted with 12 <i>Anemone ranunculoides</i></p> |
| <p>4. Frohnleiten barrenwort
<i>Epimedium ×perralchicum</i> 'Frohnleiten'</p> | <p>11. Zig-zag goldenrod <i>Solidago flexicaulis</i>
Interplanted with 12 <i>Tulipa</i> 'Formosa'</p> |
| <p>5. Lenten Rose <i>Helleborus ×hybridus</i>
Interplanted with 12 <i>Anemone nemorosa</i> 'Vestal'</p> | <p>12. Maple-leaf viburnum <i>Viburnum acerifolium</i>
Interplanted with 25 <i>Narcissus</i> 'W. P. Milner'</p> |
| <p>7. Variegated solomon's seal
<i>Polygonatum odoratum</i> 'Variegatum'</p> | |

black gums, take root disturbance in stride. I have had good luck digging under my tulip poplars and hickories. But be very cautious around oaks, beeches, and sugar maples. Incidentally, there is a danger in making your soil too rich and welcoming: tree roots may take over the space before your new plantings get a chance. The trick is to get your plants to establish their roots first. The larger the soil pocket, the easier this is to do.

Design Ideas for Shady Sites

A well-designed shade garden uses all the elements of a natural ecology—trees, shrubs, perennials, and bulbs. The shrub layer is usually the most underutilized component, which is a pity because it serves an important design function. Shrubs create architectural frames or “bones,” that give structure to the garden and help link the trees and perennials visually. Like interior walls, they can divide and define outdoor spaces. Shrubs pro-



vide dramatic foliage, colorful flowers, decorative fruits, and provocative winter silhouettes. They also supply backdrops for the herbaceous plantings that keep the garden colorful during the growing season.

With judicious selection, you can have shrubs in bloom from the earliest spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*, USDA Zones 5–8) in late winter to the last witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*, Zones 4–8) in November. Fruit is another feature—most native shrubs have attractive berries that bring color to the autumn and winter garden, and delight mockingbirds, robins, and waxwings. And for winter interest there are shrubs whose bare branches look beautiful covered with snow. These include the erratic forms of chokeberry (*Aronia arbutifolia*, Zones 4–8), oak-leaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*, Zones 5–8) and witch alder (*Fothergilla gardenii*, Zones 6–8). For a profile of *Fothergilla*, see page 14.

As you plan your plantings, keep in mind that shrubs and small trees are natural trellises for vines. Grow a clematis up through a viburnum and double the impact. Try yellow passion vine (*Passiflora lutea*, Zones 6–8) or Carolina jessamine (*Gelsemium sempervirens*, Zones 7–9) to decorate the stems of dogwood or fringetree (*Chionanthus virginicus*, Zones 4–8).

Tough Plants with Good Looks

Your choice of **shrubs** for dry shade is somewhat limited, especially where root competition is severe. Still, a

few deciduous shrubs that excel in summer without supplemental water are maple-leaf viburnum (*Viburnum acerifolium*, Zones 4–8), bush honeysuckle (*Diervilla* spp., Zones 3–8), wild hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens*, Zones 4–8), and witch hazel. In dense shade, evergreens outperform most deciduous shrubs. Established mountain laurels are nearly indestructible. Alexandrian laurel (*Danae racemosa*, Zones 7–9), with arching stems of fine-textured, leathery leaves, and Florida leucothoe (*Agarista populifolia*, Zones 7–9) are exceptional shrubs that deserve wider recognition. For groundcover effect, try sweet box (*Sarcococca hookeriana* var. *humilis*, Zones 5–8), starting with small plants that are easily inserted between tree roots.

I am fascinated by **woodland perennials**; some are enchantingly beautiful, while others are more curious than handsome. Native woodland plants are keyed to the same seasonal rhythm. They bloom when moisture is abundant, then quietly disappear as the soil dries out. This ability to go dormant in summer makes plants such as bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*, Zones 3–9), trout lily (*Erythronium* spp.), trillium, Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*, Zones 3–8), and Dutchman's breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*, Zones 4–8) perfect for dry spots under deciduous trees.

The end of a long, dry summer is

White wood aster,
Aster divaricatus,
a native of dry wood-
lands with clusters of
late-
season flowers.



12 PERENNIALS FOR DRY SHADE

Wild ginger

Asarum spp.

Cast-iron plant

Aspidistra elatior

Hardy begonia

Begonia grandis

Bergenia

Bergenia cordifolia

Siberian forget-me-not

Brunnera macrophylla

Robb's wood spurge

Euphorbia amygdaloides

'Robbiae'

Coral bells

Heuchera americana

Welsh poppy

Meconopsis cambrica

Prairie phlox

Phlox pilosa

Zig-zag goldenrod

Solidago flexicaulis

Goldsmith comfrey

Symphytum grandiflorum

'Goldsmith'

Inside-out flower

Vancouveria hexandra

the best time to assess which perennials are the most drought tolerant, and in my case an autumn garden tour provided reassurances as well as surprises.

The sight of the hellebores was comforting. I already knew they were drought tolerant, because several hellebore species are native to the oak woodlands of Tuscany, which receive no rain for up to four months. Hellebores are easy to grow and extremely long-lived in a garden setting. Most species tolerate a wide range of soil pH, but will benefit from the addition of ground limestone where the soil is acidic. They need little else in the way of care except the removal of old leaves in late winter to make way for the flowers.

My favorite hellebore—though by no means the only one I grow or the only one that can prosper in dry shade—is the Lenten rose (*Helleborus orientalis*, Zones 4–8) and its hybrids, now listed as *H. ×hybridus*. But be careful what you buy. Garden-center lenten roses vary in color from white to pink and maroon.

While no lenten roses are actually ugly, some may be richly colored and nicely formed, while others are washed out. Superior forms are now available from mail-order and specialty nurseries. Though more expensive, these controlled crosses are worth the investment.

Pure white, clear pink, maroon, apricot, yellow, and the elusive black with full, rounded flowers put the common greenish pink lenten rose to shame.



Epimediums, also known as barrenworts, bishop's hats, or fairywings, are perfect candidates for dry, shaded spots. All species exhibit good drought tolerance, but it is the evergreen species such as *E. pinnatum* and its popular hybrid *E. ×perralchicum* 'Frohnliten' (Zones 4–8) that really perform in dense shade and tolerate root competition with aplomb. Another tough hybrid is *E. ×versicolor*, which has several outstanding selections. 'Cupreum' and 'Versicolor' are pale apricot to copper-colored, while 'Sulphureum' and 'Neosulphureum' sport soft yellow flowers. The exciting new introduction 'Cheery Tars' has bicolored pink flowers. I have a mixed planting of epimedium under mature hickories in pure clay that seldom gets watered. These tidy groundcovers spread by creeping rhizomes to form dense mats of glossy, divided foliage. In early spring, arching spikes of delicate multicolored flowers make a dramatic but fleeting show. The leaves burnish to a glossy bronze in autumn. Cut the foliage of all epimediums back in late winter to allow the flowers to show themselves without distraction.

Ferns tend to be relegated to moist spots, but several species delighted me last summer by thriving and looking gorgeous with little or no supplemental water. The star was long-eared holly fern (*Polystichum neolobatum*, Zones 6–9). Stiff, arching evergreen fronds one to two feet tall form a deep forest-green clump from a branching rhizome. The fronds are twice-divided, with jagged divisions that gracefully overlap one another. Other drought-tolerant ferns include our native Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*, Zones 4–9), with upright, once-divided fronds; the diminutive and delicate Korean rock fern (*P. tsussimense*, Zones 6–9); and the graceful newcomer Makino's holly fern (*P. makinoi*, Zones 5–9), with soft, arching glossy fronds forming a foot-high "vase." The genus *Dryopteris* also contains many drought-tolerant species, most notably the marginal wood fern (*D. marginalis*, Zones 4–8), with arching, gray-green fronds to two feet. Other exceptional wood ferns you should try include the lacy fancy fern (*Dryopteris intermedia*, Zones 4–8); the stout, three-foot Mexican male fern (*D. pseudo-filix-mas*, Zones 6–9); and beaded wood fern (*D. bissetiana*, Zones 5–8), whose lustrous fronds have divisions ruffled as if they were stuffed with beads.

Bulbs are the preeminent plants of spring in the dry shade garden. Cyclamen grow alongside hellebores in the Tuscan hills. Before autumn rains arrive, hundreds of sweet-scented, butterfly-shaped flowers push from huge corms. The corms are the secret—they store the water the plant needs to blossom and leaf out. Cyclamen thrive around the shallow roots of mature trees and in other tough spots where few plants succeed. Silver-spangled, heart-shaped leaves emerge after the flowers fade, and persist through winter and spring before quietly disappearing. *Cyclamen coum* (Zones 6–8) flowers in winter and early spring, along with *C. libanotica*.

For autumn bloom and greater hardiness, you should select *C. hederifolium* (Zones 5–8) or *C. cilicium* (Zones 6–8). Young corms establish quickly and ultimately grow to the diameter of a coffee mug or larger. Mature plants are covered with hundreds of flowers. Silver-leaved varieties are available, as are particular color forms.

Like cyclamen, most bulbous plants seem to do well in difficult conditions. In fact, bulbs, corms, tubers, and the like evolved for water storage to help plants endure seasonal drought. In spring, water is available to fuel growth and flowering, and all your favorite bulbs will perform admirably.

The real stars for dry shade, however, are the species and miniature daffodils, minor bulbs such as crocus, glory of the snow, scilla, and snowdrops, as well as less familiar beauties like ipheion, wood anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*, Zones 4–8), and corydalis. All bulbs need sun when their foliage is actively growing, so they should be placed under deciduous trees for best flowering.

A number of desirable bulbs bloom in autumn. *Crocus speciosus* and *C. medius* have purple flowers, while *C. ochroleucus* and *C. speciosus* 'Albus' are white. The yellow chalices of autumn daffodil (*Sternbergia lutea*, Zones 6–9) open in late summer at the same time as *Cyclamen hederifolium*. (And remember that other plants, such as *Cyclamen coum* and *Arum italicum*, produce foliage in the autumn and bloom the following spring.)

Other Surprises

My autumn garden tour revealed another unexpected performer, *Saruma henryi*, a relative newcomer from

China. This wild-ginger relative has showy yellow spring flowers and downy, heart-shaped leaves that look super until cut down by a hard freeze. Another excellent perennial for foliage effect is *Farfugium tussilagineum*. Several forms are available, with flamboyant crests, seductive spots, and romantic white variegation. The flowers open late in the season, along with two dry-woods stalwarts, white wood aster (*Aster divaricatus*, Zones 4–8) and wreath goldenrod (*Solidago caesia*, Zones 4–8).

So if you've prematurely resigned yourself to leaf litter and pine needles in the dry, shaded parts of your garden, take heart: choosing from among the drought- and tree-root-tolerant plants described here, you can turn those boring patches of unimproved nature into a satisfying year-round display of delicate flowers, colorful berries, and eye-catching foliage. ♡

Soft Shield Fern, *Polystichum setiferum*, has a soft appearance that belies its toughness.



12 SHRUBS FOR DRY SHADE

Black chokeberry

Aronia melanocarpa

Gray dogwood

Cornus racemosa

Hazel

Corylus spp.

Witch alder

Fothergilla major

Oak-leaf hydrangea

Hydrangea quercifolia

Mahonia

Mahonia 'Arthur Menzies'

Mountain andromeda

Pieris floribunda

Roseshell azalea

Rhododendron prinophyllum

Fragrant sumac

Rhus aromatica

Snowberry

Symphoricarpos orbiculatus

Blueberry

Vaccinium spp.

Southern arrowwood

Viburnum rafinesquianum