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Perennials for the Shade

Not everyone has a sunny yard. Some of us are blessed with a nice cool, shady retreat. The problem is what to plant there. Forget Rudbeckias and Shasta Daises. You'll never have that English Garden look. Your options are much more adventurous than that. Shade plants tend to have more subtle blooms and rely more heavily on foliage to add interest to the garden. Just as all sunny gardens are not created equally, neither are all shady gardens the same. There are varying degrees of shade to consider, as well as the moisture level of your garden.

Part Shade generally means a combination of direct sun for a few hours a day followed by shade - like the eastern exposure. But if you have dappled sunlight, or bright shade under a tree all day long, that would also classify as partial shade.

Full Shade is on the north side of a house or wall. You might get a few rays peeking in early in the morning or just before the sun goes down, but dense shade prevails most of the day. Full shade is also what's underneath big old trees.

Most shade loving plants adapt well sharing the garden with larger trees or shrubs, just as they do in a natural woodland setting. Regular watering is critical - especially during the first year. An inch of water a week is a good rule of thumb. Be sure to add a good layer of organic mulch material to conserve water and keep down the weeds. A soaker hose placed in the garden before mulching will allow you to water with ease. It's been my experience that most shade perennials like it a little on the moist side - so keep a careful eye on the garden. If you know that your garden tends to be on the dry side, stay away from Astilbes and Ferns - two notorious water lovers. If there is a lot of competition for moisture under your trees, you might think about placing some big, beautiful pots under the trees and plant in those. Sometimes those old Maple trees are really too much competition for a garden. Putting in a raised bed is another option that works well.

If you are planting a woodland garden, don't forget to put some early flowering bulbs in. They will be up and flowering before the trees leaf out. Crocus, Scilla, and Snowdrops are good choices for naturalizing under trees. They can always be tucked in during the fall.

Hosta and ferns are the two perennials that most people think of when they think of shade gardens. They are wonderful and a great jumping off point, but don't stop there. Need some "structure" in your garden? Most Hydrangeas love the shade as do Clethra. There are plenty of evergreens that can add good "bones" to you garden. Experiment with Epimediums, a wonderful little woodland groundcover with beautiful spring flowers. Heucheras add a splash of color with their bright, bold foliage.

Don't forget the annuals! Nothing adds a splash of color to a shady spot like Impatiens. Coleus, Lobelia, and Tuberous Begonias are also great choices for added color. Be sure to read the plant tags and ask questions. Just remember that plants are adaptable and what's considered full shade to one, might be partial for another. Experiment and have fun.