White Flowers Brighten Shady Spots

by Pam Wallace, UC Master Gardener

I've never been a big fan of the color white, especially in flowers. White flowers always seemed rather "blah" to me, and in the sunlight, washed out and pale. But then a "lucky accident" changed my mind.

My backyard has a grouping of four Coastal Redwoods. Now that they're several years old, they've created an area of deep shade that receives only an hour or two of late afternoon sun. They've started to limb up a bit, making the ground underneath look a little bare and lonely, even with a thick layer of mulch. That's when I decided it would be nice to plant some ground covers.

I didn't want to disturb the roots of the trees too much, so I went to the nursery looking for smaller plants in six-packs or three inch pots. I took home a variegated lamium, even though I wasn't all that impressed with it.

It wasn't long, however, before I was pleasantly surprised by how crisp and bright the silvery-white leaves looked in the dappled shade. I decided it would be fun to plant the entire bed in white-flowering plants or plants in variegated foliage of white and green.

Using only the colors green and white in different textures is restful--and the white not only seems cooling, but brightens the shade, creating a cooling oasis on a hot summer day and a fragrant, glowing retreat in the summer dusk. What could be nicer during a long, hot valley summer?

The first step in planting a white shade garden is soil preparation. In a situation with a lot of mature trees, there is not much you can do to turn the soil under the trees because of the abundance of large roots. I've found a way around this by creating planting mounds for each plant. I create a shallow depression in the soil in which to place the plant, surrounding it with a mix of potting soil and regular garden soil. Be careful not to plant too close to the trunk of the trees, but farther out around the drip line.

After planting, I apply a two to three inch layer of mulch to help conserve soil moisture and provide organic matter, being careful to not spread the mulch around the base of the trees or plants themselves.

A shade garden should be watered deeply, but less frequently. Shade gardens will generally require less weeding because the low light levels discourage weed germination.

There is a wide variety of variegated plants and white-flowering plants that will do well in the valley in a shady situation. Keep in mind that using too many different kinds of variegated plants results in a scrambled effect. It's best to either use them as focal points or in mass plantings of the same type of plant.

My favorite variegated perennial to use in a shady bed is Hosta. The big leaves edged in white brighten the darkest corners. Other variegated perennials to consider are: agapanthus "Tinkerbell," brunnera "Jack Frost," pelargoniums, lungworts, coral bells, and ferns.

Some white variegated groundcovers include: lamium, ajuga, plectranthus (Swedish ivy), helichrysum (licorice plant), and ivy.

I especially like white impatiens in a shady bed. They flower well in low-light situations, the blooms are large, and the dark green foliage provides a startling contrast, making the crisp white blooms seem to almost glow. For areas that get less than five hours of sun a day, try white-flowering impatiens, begonias, bacopa, cyclamen, calla lily, pansies, violas, violets, sweet woodruff and bleeding hearts.

Some white-flowering vines to consider are: moonflowers, clematis, climbing roses, morning glories, climbing hydrangea, or honeysuckle.

Shade gardens naturally occur under trees, however, if you want to create one in the absence of shading trees, architectural features such as pergolas, arbors and trellises can create shade where there is none. Narrow slats or lath can reduce the sun by 50 percent, providing plenty of shade for tender plants.

My white shade garden can double as a moonlight garden. A moonlight or night garden contains primarily white or silver plants that can be enjoyed at night, when their colors reflect the light and seem to glow in the light of the moon.

The promise of a shady retreat will draw a visitor across a sunny, hot lawn to explore the coolness. The silvery foliage and white flowers lighten dark corners and give the eyes a rest and relief from the blazing sun and heat. Shady gardens evoke mystery and privacy -- they feel peaceful and intimately enclosed because of the coolness and dark colors. Transform those dark corners of the garden into shade havens from summer sun.

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