

What Plants Do Well in Dry Shade

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, Feb. 23, 2018

Q: I have a shady spot in my yard that I would like to brighten up with some plants. The area is partially under some oak trees so I would need to have plants that do well in dry conditions. Do you have any suggestions?

A: Dry shade is defiantly one of the more challenging landscape areas to work with in our climate. I attended a talk on this very subject last week in the Bay Area and was envious of all the options they have for plant material with the cooler, milder climate.

When thinking of plants for shade my first thought is to use plants with foliage shades and variegations. Many plants have variegated or interesting leaf textures that do well in the shade. Hosta are the most common shade tolerant plants with variegated leaves but do not do well without regular water.

Here are some of the plants that I have seen perform well in our college arboretum's shady areas with very little water:

Bergenia crassifolia or *cordifolia* is a plant that grows in a rosette shape and has thick leathery leaves that can be spoon shaped. In light shade it will have spikes of showy pink or red flowers. The variety "winterglow" has colorful fall foliage that will last most of the winter.

For sheer variety in leaf colors, look no further than *Heuchera* (coral bells). The leaves of this perennial plant come in many beautiful colors from an almost silvery purple to bright red. And when in bloom, the spiraling flowers reach above the foliage to "wave" in light breezes. If you want to go more native, there is a very nice California native variety *Heuchera maxima*.

Galium oderatum (sweet woodruff) is a nice plant to use as a ground cover in shade. Not only is it easy to grow, but it happily spreads (not too assertively so as to be obnoxious) and has wonderful, fragrant white flowers in late spring and summer.

Another very hardy ground cover for the shade is *iris germanica* (bearded iris). Once established plants do well in the shade, but will only bloom in light shade. *Iris douglasiana* is the California native iris that may bloom better in the dry shade.

There are a couple of shrubs that will add color to any dry shady area. *Cornus stolonifera* (red twig dogwood) a medium size shrub with bright red stems that will add a "pop" of color against a dark green or gray ground cover. And *Mahonia pinnata* (Oregon grape) a shrub with shiny green leaves and bright yellow flowers.

If you are able to give regular water to a shaded area, there are two outstanding perennials to consider. *Astilbe x arendsii* (false spiraea) has a diverse selection of varieties with many options for color; you can find flowers in violet, white, pink, and deep red. And the *Dicentra* hybrids (bleeding heart) have red, pink or white flowers to choose from. There is also a very nice California native, *Dicentra formosa*, that does well in shade with regular water.

Remember all plants need regular water to become established and even once established the drought-tolerant plants mentioned above will still need some water over the summer months.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.