



## Out of the Sun

Shade gardens are usually viewed as a sad and distant second-best to those blessed with sunshine. Gardeners condemned to living with overhanging trees or tall, sun-blocking buildings will lament their inability to grow the bright annuals and cheerfully blooming traditional perennials that thrive so effortlessly in less light-challenged spots. No roses or apple trees! No zinnias, marigolds, petunias! The horror! The shade gardener glumly passes them by and fills the shopping cart with...hostas.

But the times, they are a changin'—and so is the climate. In this summer of record-breaking heat waves, the prospect of a cool, shady spot in which to sit, sip a cold drink, and listen to the birds is ever more attractive, and so this Cinderella, slighted for so long, is poised to become the belle of the ball. My own yard doesn't have a good option right now, being divided fairly equally between sunny open space and poison ivy-infested woodlands, but I have my eye on a few promising corners—and I won't be stocking them with hostas.

Not that there's anything wrong with hostas. I inherited quite a few, and even added one variety, the whimsically named "Humpback Whale." It's one of the largest cultivars, producing bluish leaves close to two feet long on a plant seven feet wide. The smaller variegated green-and-white varieties already here create an impression of dappled sunlight even in the densest shade. But hostas are a favorite of deer and slugs, and they're not native. We can do better: after all, our state used to be nearly all forest, so we can choose from many colorful, hardy, and resilient native plants, all of which evolved in the woods and are well adapted to shady conditions.

From the top: Pagoda dogwood, redbud, and mountain laurel will create a garden worthy of a fairy godmother, filling the spring with shades of pink and white flowers. Add sugar maple for its brilliant fall foliage, river birch for its cinnamon-colored peeling bark, Eastern white pine for winter interest, and tulip trees for their intriguing green-and-white flowers. Of course, if you don't have some already, plant white oak, which supports the greatest number of native insects.

Moving to the middle level, there's a variety of native shrubs to choose from: Service berry (along the river we call it shadbush) and white fringe tree (possibly only nearly native; sources disagree on how far north its range extends). Fall-blooming witch hazel offers ribbon-like yellow flowers; spice bush's yellow-green spring flowers

mature into red berries later in the year; and sweet spire offers white flowers in spring and brilliant red leaves in the fall. And all three are fragrant. Add chokeberry for its fruit. When winter comes, and the sun penetrates through leafless trees, you'll be glad you planted red twig dogwood, with its glorious bright red bark.

"But, I want flowers!" Of course you do, and so you shall have them. Some are easy to identify by their names: woodland phlox, wood anemone, and white wood aster. Pink bleeding heart—get the native variety, *dicentra eximia*. Spring brings the charming, pure white, low-growing bloodroot (*sanguinaria canadensis*) and the red and yellow wild columbine. For drama, Solomon's seal offers striped white and pale green leaves with delicate white flowers all along the stems. Appalachian false goat's beard (*astilbe biternate*) makes even more of a statement: unlike its demure cousins found in garden centers, this *astilbe* is three to six feet tall, with big blowsy panicles of creamy flowers. Plant some cardinal flower for summer color, and set off everything with ferns.

If there's any bare ground left, fill in with native groundcovers. Partridgeberry has dark green leaves, small white spring flowers and red berries. Bearberry also has red berries, against tiny leaves of a brighter green. Wild ginger has velvety, heart-shaped leaves, plus an unusual purple-brown flower. If you have enough flowers, and want a different texture that will act as a backdrop, plant blue rug juniper. It's low growing, fairly resilient, and evergreen.

Now you have a first-class shade garden, filled with a variety of natives for every season. Do you have to be a purist? No. I'm not; I do try to plant mostly natives these days, but I still tuck in some feathery non-native *astilbe*; coral bells, native as far north as Virginia and hybridized into dozens of bright foliage colors; and *impatiens*. It's hard to imagine a flowering plant that gives more color for so little work than *impatiens*. And neither the plants nor their seeds can survive a Connecticut winter, so they can't become invasive. I'm a bit resentful of bees right now, as one had the bad manners to sting me an hour ago, but I'm still going to urge you to go native as much as you possibly can.