Shade Gardening for North Texas

Texas A&M AgriLife
RESEARCH | EXTENSION

Water University

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What grows in the shade? It's Water University's most frequently asked question, and it poses a problem most often associated with a homeowner's attempt to establish (or to continue growing) turfgrass in an area that is simply too shady. While turfgrass may no longer be an option, there are hundreds of shade-loving plants, both native and adapted, that will perform exceptionally in the part-shade to dense-shade areas of any landscape. These shade areas are also primed to accept leisure installations that allow homeowners and guests to enjoy the outdoors at home through the warm summer months of North Texas.

The Glossy Abelia is a beautiful shrub that grows very well in shaded areas. Flip to page 3 for a list of some of our favorite shade plants for North Texas.

Understanding Plant Light Requirements

The amount and quality of light on your property can change over time, especially in landscapes with maturing trees and shrubs or with new buildings and fences.

While established turfgrass and other sun-loving plants might grow successfully in shady areas for a while, many times we start to see them decline, becoming thinner and less dense. Flowering plants might even stop blooming as the shade begins to encroach on areas that have typically received higher amounts of sunlight. Over-watering and/or over-fertilizing are often the responses to growing plants that are better adapted to sunlight in lower light situations. These poor management practices can be detrimental to your landscape and the environment in the long run.

Light Conditions Defined

If parts of your landscape do not receive at least 5 hours of sunlight, turfgrass and other sun-loving plants may not be the best option. Texas A&M AgriLife's Water University has a variety of resources to help you choose the best options for the shaded areas of your landscape.

Sun
Direct sunlight on plant all day

Part Sun
Filtered light, 2-3hrs without direct sun

Part Shade
Dappled light, 4-5hrs without direct sun

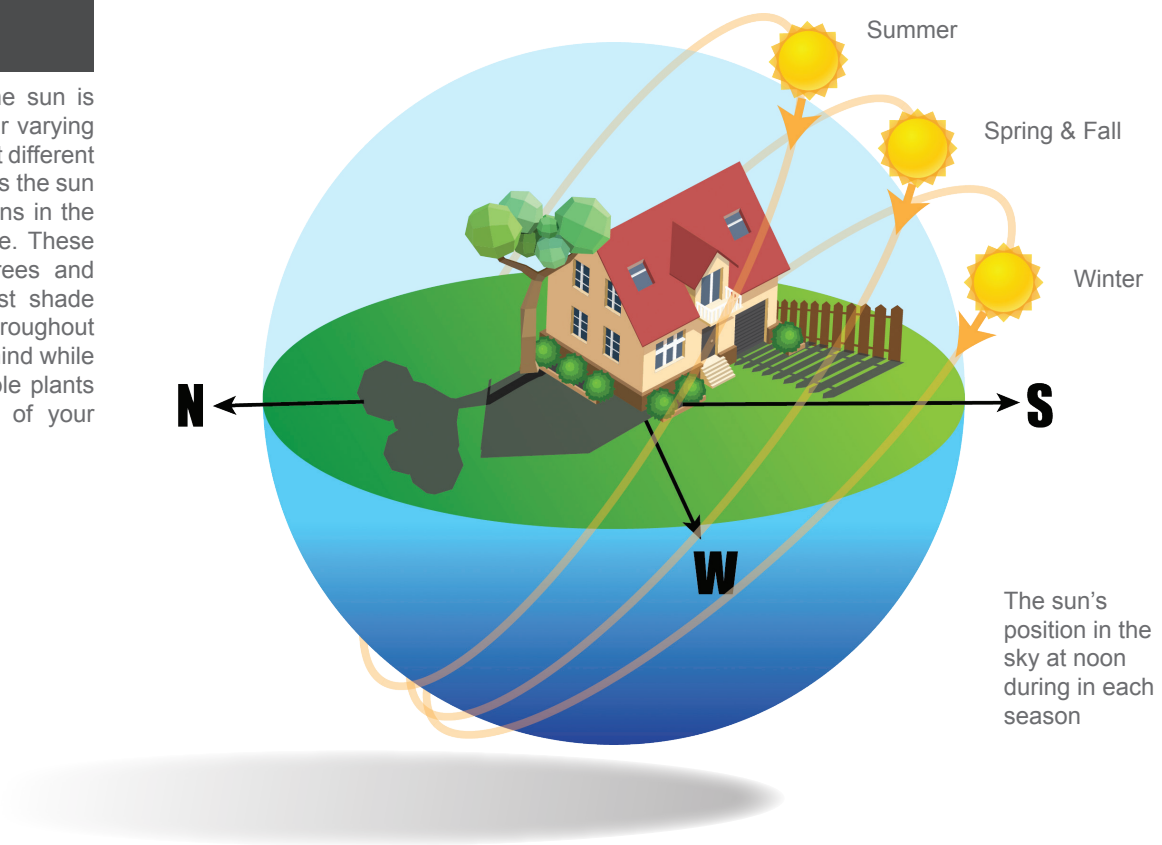
Full Shade
No direct sunlight on plant all day but may be bright due to reflective light

Dense Shade
Deep shade, no direct sunlight all day and may appear dark with minimal to no reflective light

Turfgrass alternatives and shade-loving plants work best in these areas

Seasonal Sun Positioning

Earth's path around the sun is not a perfect circle. Our varying distance from the sun at different times of the year causes the sun to hold different positions in the sky as seasons change. These positions will cause trees and other structures to cast shade at varying angles throughout the year. Keep this in mind while selecting the most viable plants for the shaded areas of your landscape.



The sun's position in the sky at noon during in each season

Put the Right Plant in the Right Place

Native and adapted plants are the ideal choice for an aesthetically pleasing, water efficient landscape, including those with areas with limited sunlight where turfgrass will not grow.

Whether you are interested in a well-manicured look or a more naturalistic landscape design, there are a number of shade-tolerant plants with various structures, textures and colors to meet your needs and help you save precious time and money.

A healthy shade-tolerant plant is a valuable asset, but to ensure the best success, it needs to be planted properly and in the right place, depending on the specific requirements for that plant.

Read the plant tag, and pay close attention to its hardiness zone, light requirement, size and spacing. Proper spacing is even more important in shade conditions to avoid fungal and disease problems.

Use caution when planting under mature trees. Deep tilling can damage, not only the surface roots, but also the fine feeder roots that absorb water and nutrients. Covering or damaging the roots creates entryways for insects and diseases to enter and damage or kill your tree. Remember when planting under trees to:

- Dig relatively small holes.
- Carefully plant between major roots and let the plants fill in the area.
- Maintain a 2"- 4" layer of mulch on the soil surrounding the tree, being sure to keep the base or root flare of the tree uncovered.

Reading your plant tags is the key to understanding your plants' needs .

Native and Adaptive Plant Characteristics

Native and Adaptive Plants are
- Drought Tolerant
- Heat Tolerant

And they typically require
- Less Water
- Less Fertilizer
- Fewer Pesticides

Visit our searchable Plants of North Texas database for information on many additional shade plants at:

wateruniversity.tamu.edu

A Few of our Favorite North Texas Shade Plants

Ferns
Wavy Cloak Fern
Holly Fern
Autumn Fern
Southern Wood Fern

Groundcovers
Bugleweed
Horse Herb
Purple Wintercreeper
Lamium
Frog Fruit

Ornamental Grasses
Inland Sea Oats
Indiangrass

Ornamental Trees
Japanese Maple
Redbud
Possumhaw Holly
Yaupon Holly
Cherry Laurel
Texas Mountain Laurel

Perennials
Berkeley Sedge
Native Sedges
Texas Gold Columbine
Cast Iron Plant
Mist Flower
Lenten Rose, Hellebore
Coral Bells, Heuchera
Turk's Cap
Garden Phlox
Lyre Leaf Sage
Cedar Sage
Leopard Plant

Shrubs
Beautyberry
Flowering Quince
False Aralia
Oakleaf Hydrangea
St. John's Wort
Dwarf Yaupon Holly
Chinese Fringe Flower
Bridal Wreath Spirea
Bush Germander
Eastern Snowball Viburnum
Rusty Blackhaw Viburnum
Glossy Abelia
Japanese Yew
Oregon Grape Mahonia
Soft Caress Mahonia

Palms
Dwarf Palmetto

Gardening Under Trees

Mature trees are one of the most valuable components of a landscape, whether for their aesthetic beauty alone or their numerous economic and environmental benefits like:

- Providing oxygen and clean the air
- Cooling surrounding areas (including your home)
- Helping to prevent soil erosion and water pollution
- Providing food and habitat for wildlife
- Increasing property values

Although light pruning by a certified arborist can be done to promote the long-term health of a tree, we do **NOT** promote over-pruning techniques strictly to increase light infiltration, especially techniques that affect mature branches like:

- **Limbing up (crown-raising)** - the removal of lower branches to greatly increase the distance of branches from the ground
- **Pollarding** - the removal of upper tree branches

Mature trees, especially evergreens, benefit when healthy lower branches are left intact. Removing large limbs can increase the risk of decay, and over pruning removes much of the tree's energy absorbing needles and leaves. It can also cause stress, negatively impacting the health and vigor of the tree.

The shade provides limitless opportunities for growing diverse plant species alongside non-living, pervious aesthetic features like patios, seating areas and walkways.

Patios and Sitting Areas

Another great option for utilizing the space under a large tree is to install a shaded sitting area. There are a number of pervious paving materials to consider, which not only look great, but also allow water to infiltrate and to be used by the tree. Paving bricks, flagstones and products like decomposed granite also allow water and oxygen exchange in the root zone as opposed to solid (impervious) concrete surfaces, which can be harmful to the tree. Shade trees and adapted perennials also provide inviting areas that stay cool in the warmer months of North Texas.

Soil Preparation and Amendments

A number of amendments can be added to your soil, but what you add will depend on the specific issues your soil faces. Drainage, fertility, pH balance and a host of other factors will need to be considered. A soil test is an easy and inexpensive service that provides shade gardeners with information on the amendments and fertilizers they need as well as how much to add.

Helpful amendments that help to improve the clay soils of North Texas

Compost is a nutrient rich soil conditioner consisting of broken down organic material. Incorporate or top-dress ½" to 2" of compost into the soil to improve drainage while maintaining your soil's water-holding capacity.

Expanded Shale is a porous lightweight aggregate with the ability to improve drainage in clay soils and hold moisture at the same time. Expanded shale is most effective when incorporated into the soil when establishing a new planting bed. Add up to 3" then till or mix in thoroughly to a depth of 6" with a shovel or spade.

A good compost is essential in almost every planting situation. It will improve drainage, help your soil hold water and provide essential nutrients to your native and adapted plants

Shade Gardening Tips

Determine the various degrees of shade in your yard- i.e. How much sunlight and when? A good idea is to take a photograph from the same place in your yard at 8 am, noon and 5 pm. This will show you where shade covers your landscape at different times of day. Some plants might tolerate some morning sun, but burn up in the heat of the afternoon sun.

Try shade loving plants where turfgrass won't grow. Ornamental trees, shrubs, ferns, ornamental grasses and groundcovers, mulch pathways and even sitting areas with pervious paving are strong solutions for replacing turfgrass in the shade. There is a whole new world of plant material that not only tolerates, but thrives in the shade. These shade-loving plants vary tremendously in their form, foliage and colors of their blooms!

Pay attention to shadows of nearby buildings, fences, shrubs and trees.
A tree, shrub, building or fence should be considered an asset, serving as a backdrop or structural focal point that can complement and enhance your plantings.

Be careful when planting- Don't damage tree roots!
Take care to avoid damaging roots, which can extend past the drip-line, when working under or near trees. The drip line is the area under a tree's canopy.

Water only as needed - Infrequently and deeply! We see even less water loss in shaded areas, both in the plants themselves with slower transpiration rates and reduced evaporation from the soil.

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