

SHADE REVEALED—RECOMMENDED PLANTS

A presentation as part of the Moses Greeley Parker Lecture Series by AMY ZIFFER

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—Plants in **bold** are native

—A check in the “Foliage” column means the plant’s foliage is a strong feature

VERY SHADE TOLERANT BACKBONE PLANTS

LATIN NAME	COMMON NAME	COMMENTS	FOLIAGE
PERENNIALS			
Anemone vitifolia 'Robustissima'	Japanese anemone	Other species and cultivars are also known as Japanese anemone, but this one is reliably cold hardy here; blooms mid to late summer and can continue into fall; long bloomer; deer like.	✓
Aruncus dioicus Aruncus x dioicus (intermediate height) Aruncus aesthusifolius (dwarf)	Goatsbeard	A. dioicus is like a giant astilbe and has a tree-like root system; A. aesthusifolius has very finely divided leaves, forms a lacy mound, and makes an excellent shady rock garden plant.	✓
Asarum canadense Asarum europaeum	Native wild ginger European ginger	Deciduous groundcover—excellent “base” for all shade plantings; A. e. is glossy & evergreen.	✓
Aster divaricatus and A. cordifolius (syn. Eurybia divaricata and Symphyotrichum cordifolium)	Woodland asters	Two excellent plants for late summer/fall bloom; 15-30 inches tall with many small white or pale lavender flowers.	
Carex siderostica 'Variegata' (note: some other Carex are not cold hardy here)	Variegated broad-leaved sedge	Foliage plant for edging. Tolerates average to moist soils; slugs like.	✓
Cimicifuga racemosa Cimicifuga simplex 'White Pearl' Cimicifuga 'Atropurpurea', 'Brunette' and 'Hillside Black Beauty'	Fairy candles, bugbane, snakeroot, black cohosh	Flowers of C. racemosa have a strong scent some people don't like! Plant at a distance from house or plant other kinds. Burgundy-leaved cultivars fade to green by summer. Late bloomers starting mid July or August.	✓
Epimedium species and cultivars	Epimedium	Top notch dry shade groundcover; spreads slowly to moderately, easy to control; flowers can be white, orange, purple, magenta, pale to medium yellow; 'Frohnleiten' (medium yellow) stands up to winter well and spreads fast.	✓

Eupatorium rugosum	Snakeroot	Common roadside plant; often sold in the form 'Chocolate', named for its dark leaf; late summer/ fall bloomer.	
Geranium macrorrhizum	Bigroot geranium	The best shade-tolerant geranium; aromatic divided leaves that color up slightly in fall; flowers can be white, pale pink or fuchsia.	✓
Helleborus x orientalis and other Helleborus	Hellebore	Many people would call this the best shade garden plant of all!! First perennial to bloom in this climate; some other species and hybrid strains may not be hardy here.	✓
Hosta species and cultivars	Hosta	Foliage plant in wide range of sizes; blue, green and white- and yellow-variegated forms available; a favorite deer food, unfortunately.	✓
Kirengeshoma spp.	Yellow wax bells	Emerges a little late; becomes very bushy in growth over time.	✓
Pachysandra procumbens	Native pachysandra	Deciduous; very shade tolerant; much less aggressive than Japanese pachysandra.	✓
Polemonium reptans	Jacob's-ladder	Fine-textured foliage can suffer if allowed to dry out; may die back and regrow after flowering; white variegated cvs. ('Stairway to Heaven', 'Touch of Class') are available. Charming blue flowers.	
Polygonatum—native spp. as well as P. odoratum 'Variegatum'	Solomon's-seal	Virtually maintenance free; clump together tightly in quantities of 15 or more or scatter throughout the garden; deer will browse.	✓
Pulmonaria cultivars	Lungwort	Foliage plant; fantastic spotting and silvering of leaves; blooms here beginning first week of April; prone to powdery mildew—'Roy Davidson' and 'Margery Fish' are resistant; benefits from deadheading.	✓
Rodgersia podophylla, R. aesculifolia and others	Rodgersia	Very large, ornamental leaves; leaves very shade tolerant but needs light shade to flower	✓
Smilacina racemosa	False Solomon's-seal	Native with fluffy white terminal flowers and arching stems like true Solomon's seal; produces ornamental reddish berries that are short-lived; flowers better in light shade but foliage grows well in deeper shade	
Tricyrtis spp.	Toad lily	Late flowering, arching stems and orchid-like flowers, often with striking spots & markings.	✓

GROUNDCOVERS			
Asarum canadense, Epimedium, Geranium macrorrhizum and Pachysandra procumbens can all be used as groundcovers	See above	See above	✓
Vancouveria hexandra (native to west coast)	Inside-out flower	4" mat of very delicate foliage and small white flowers in early spring. Grows more sparsely and spreads more slowly here than in its native range. Reminiscent of Epimedium.	✓ but small!
Vinca minor	Periwinkle	Evergreen; ferns can grow in the midst of this.	✓
Waldsteinia fragarioides and W. ternata (the latter is native to the west coast)	Barren strawberry	W. fragarioides is native to East Coast, W. ternata to West Coast. Very low growing, semi-evergreen, easy to control; small yellow flowers in April. Ferns can grow in the midst of this.	✓

FERNS FOR BORDER USE			
Adiantum pedatum	Northern maidenhair fern	Delicate appearance; small; black stalks; will succumb to frost early. Clumper. Finicky.	✓
Athyrium filix-femina Athyrium niponicum 'Pictum' and variants	Lady fern Japanese painted fern	Lady fern is delicate and lacy; clumper. Japanese painted fern has blue and pink tones; although a clumper, needs regular division.	✓
Cyrtomium falcatum	Japanese holly fern	Pinnae of fronds are reminiscent of holly leaves, glossy and dark green.	✓
Dryopteris filix-mas	Male fern	Similar to lady fern; variable; clumper.	✓
Dryopteris marginalis	Leather wood fern or marginal wood fern	Statuesque; the genus <i>Dryopteris</i> may contain more good ferns for Northern gardens than any other--almost any hardy <i>Dryopteris</i> is a good investment. Clumper.	✓
Osmunda claytoniana	Interrupted fern	Adaptable, easy; excellent naturalizer; clumper	✓
Polystichum acrostichoides	Christmas fern	Very adaptable; best all-around garden fern; "evergreen." Clumper.	✓

FERNS FOR NATURALIZING— Note that any fern for border use can also be used for naturalizing			
Dennstaedtia punctilobula	Hay-scented fern	Only effective when massed; pale yellow color in fall. Running fern without discernible crowns.	✓
Mattheucia struthiopteris	Ostrich fern	Statuesque; requires moist site to attain its full potential.	✓
Onoclea sensibilis	Sensitive fern	Unusual frond; requires moist site to remain attractive all season long. Running fern without discernible crowns.	✓
Osmunda cinnamomea	Cinnamon fern	Requires moist site. Notable, persistent fertile fronds.	✓
Osmunda regalis	Royal fern	Only for consistently wet sides such as streamsides.	✓

**VERY SHADE TOLERANT
ACCENT PLANTS**

Corydalis lutea C. ochroleuca	Yellow fumitory	Petite and ferny; blooms all summer; needs good drainage; excellent rock garden plant; self-sows prolifically! C. lutea has yellow flowers; C. ochroleuca has cream flowers.	✓ feathery
Disporum maculatum	Nodding mandarin	Vase-shaped; plant in the midst of a short, non-aggressive groundcover (Asarum, Lamium etc.)	
Geranium maculatum G. phaeum	Spotted geranium Dusky cranesbill	G. maculatum is native and rather wispy; G. phaeum cvs. usually have dark purple flowers	
Hepatica acutiloba and H. americana	Hepatica	Delightful gem only 6" all, early white flowers sometimes tinted with pale blue or pink. Marbled leaves. Plant in LARGE quantities.	
Jeffersonia diphylla	Twinleaf	Delightful! Very short flowering time; deer will browse; forms unique seed pods shaped like Nantucket baskets.	✓
Lamiastrum galeobdolon	Yellow archangel	Low growing spreader with variegated leaves and yellow flowers; good for interplanting with ferns; 'Hermann's Pride' is a common cv.	✓

Lamium maculatum	Dead-nettle	Low growing spreader good for “grounding” plants with bare ankles. Nice to drape over a rock wall; I recommend 'Shell Pink' for its soft pink flower color and 'White Nancy' for its white flower color and mostly white leaf.	✓
Phlox divaricata and P. stolonifera	Creeping woodland phlox	Very low growing foliage; flowers are blue, pink or white on 8” stems	
Uvularia grandiflora	Large-flowered bellwort	Large clumps are most impressive.	

**VERY SHADE TOLERANT
SPRING EPHEMERALS AND BULBS**

SPRING EPHEMERALS			
Arisaema triphyllum A. dracontium	Jack-in-the pulpit Green dragon plant	Resembled trillium in leaf; ornamental red berries in early autumn. A. dracontium has a whip-like “tongue” and is quite unusual.	
Corydalis solida	No common name I know	Comes and goes very quickly; very diminutive.	
Dicentra cucullaria	Dutchman’s breeches	Comes and goes very quickly; very diminutive.	
Dodecatheon media	Shooting star	Dies back fast.	
Erythronium ‘Pagoda’	hybrid trout lily	Mottled leaves reminiscent of trout markings; yellow dangling pagoda-shaped flowers.	
Mertensia virginica	Virginia bluebells	Very showy; dies back very fast after flowering.	
Sanguinaria canadensis	Bloodroot	Dies back mid to late summer.	
Trillium spp. especially T. grandiflorum and T. erectum	Trillium	Expensive and slow to establish but well worth it; do not dig from wild!	✓

BULBS			
Crocus (many species and cultivars)	Crocus	Welcome for its very early splash of intense color, but flowers fade quickly.	
Eranthis hyemalis	Winter aconite	Unusual, perhaps the earliest spring bulb.	
Galanthus elwesii or G. nivalis	Snowdrops	Very early, petite and long blooming.	
Scilla siberica	Siberian squill	Rare true blue color; forms colonies quickly.	

**LIGHT TO MODERATE SHADE
BACKBONE PLANTS**

PERENNIALS			
Ajuga reptans	Bugleweed	Very low growing spreader with blue flower spikes; can be mowed after flowering; best as a groundcover under a specimen tree.	
Alchemilla mollis	Lady's mantle	Long bloomer; velvety leaves; chartreuse flowers; good "mixer;" light shade only.	✓
Amsonia tabernaemontana	Bluestar	Slow to put on size but forms large crowns in the long run; willowy foliage; sap can irritate skin	✓
Astilbe--many cultivars	Astilbe	The backbone of the summer shade garden! There are many kinds with bloom times ranging from early June to early August, so if you have room plant several kinds for a succession of flowers; benefits from division every 3-4 years.	✓
Brunnera macrophylla and cultivars, many variegated	Siberian bugloss	True blue flowers that look almost identical to forget-me-nots.	✓
Chasmanthium latifolium	Northern sea oats	Native, upright, mid sized grass with showy seed heads good for dried arrangements; can self sow a lot.	✓
Digitalis grandiflora	Yellow foxglove	Low growing in leaf but quite tall in flower; creamy flower color; sometimes self sows	
Galium odoratum	Mayflower	Fine textured, low growing, airy groundcover with small white flowers; use with extreme caution—very difficult to eradicate if removal is desired.	✓
Hakonechloa macra	Hakon grass	Mounding, low growing grass with moderately broad leaves; foliage grows well in shade but flowers are minimal without more sun; many gold and white variegated cvs. are available.	
Lathyrus vernus	Perennial pea	Plant in drifts of a dozen or so unless your garden is quite small.	

L. dentata 'Desdemona' and 'Othello' L. stenocephala 'The Rocket' L. przewalskii —note that L. dentata works best as a backbone plant, while others may only work as accent plants toward the rear of a planting	Ligularia	L. przewalskii has a divided leaf that gives it a lacy look and tolerates average soil moisture; other ligularias must have constant moisture or they wilt!! 'Desdemona' and 'Othello' have flowers like huge orange-yellow dandelions; L. stenocephala and przewalskii have yellow spikes.	✓
Liriope species and cultivars (can be a backbone plant when used for edging)	Liriope, lilyturf	Mass as a groundcover or line a walkway with this small, neat foliage plant; clumps of the variegated types can nicely break up the masses of green in a perennial border.	✓
Spiraea 'Gold Mound', 'Lime Mound' and 'Magic Carpet'	Spiraea	A shrub, not a perennial, but the small size and look of these cultivars makes it possible to use them like perennials; bright spring foliage ('Magic Carpet' is tipped red; 'Gold Mound' and 'Lime Mound' are lemon-lime) greens out by summer. Flowers lightly in shade.	✓
Thalictrum spp.	Meadow rue	Native species exist but are hard to find and not quite as showy as exotic spp.; height varies from 6 inches to 6 feet! T. aquilegifolium is a nice moderate sized species.	✓ Needs grooming.
Tiarella species and cultivars	Foamflower	Reblooms once if deadheaded; most have nice mounding foliage; some run; many kinds coming out now with zonal patterns in leaves.	✓ Can be very ornamental

LIGHT TO MODERATE SHADE ACCENT PLANTS

Aquilegia (many species, cultivar and strains)	Columbine	In most strains, colors vary; 'Biedermeier' strain is compact; native A. canadensis can be short-lived but reseeds; A. alpina is a good blue.	
Carex elata 'Bowles Golden'	Bowles golden sedge	Golden, airy foliage; same culture as above.	✓
Dicentra eximia	Native bleeding heart	Reblooms; pink and white forms; ferny foliage. Much smaller than D. spectabilis and does not go dormant.	
Heuchera americana, H. villosa, H. micrantha is native to west coast	Coral bells	H. villosa 'Autumn Bride' is the showiest bloomer of the bunch. H. americana 'Dale's Strain' has marbled leaves; H. micrantha and H. villosa cvs. can have purplish leaves.	✓

Primula species and cultivars	Primrose	The kinds that hold their flowers up high (so-called "candelabra" types), such as P. veris and P. japonica, make the best garden plants; P. sieboldii will go summer dormant.	
Tellima grandiflora	Fringe-cups	Similar to Heuchera (coral bells).	✓
Trollius x cultorum	Globeflower	Trouble free reliable performer with buttercup flowers in varying shades of yellow.	

**LIGHT TO MODERATE SHADE
SPRING EPHEMERALS AND BULBS**

SPRING EPHEMERALS			
Dicentra spectabilis and D. s. 'Alba'	Old-fashioned bleeding heart	Increases in size quickly; goes summer dormant in August.	
Podophyllum peltatum	Mayapple	A large, fleshy plant that dies back late summer, leaving a big gap; best for naturalizing.	✓

BULBS			
Anemone blanda	Windflower	Charming small daisies in white, pink or blue; flowers do not open on cloudy days.	
Endymion hispanicus (syn. Hyacinthoides hispanica)	Spanish bluebell	Spectacular but bloom time is late and short; good intermixed with small hostas or other plants that emerge late.	
Muscari armeniacum, M. botryoides 'Album' and M. latifolium	Grape hyacinth	Grassy foliage that can stay green a long time before dying back; foliage often returns in fall.	

Note: You can't rely on generic sun and shade recommendations for plants such as the information on plant tags. Those are generalized for the entire country. Many plants that can be grown well in shade further south require a lot of sun in the North.

GENERAL INFORMATION NUMBERS

Connecticut residents:

UConn (University of Connecticut) Home & Garden Center toll-free number: (877) 486-6271. It should be your first stop for any gardening question. Staff on hand during normal weekday business hours. Offer free literature on many different subjects.

Cooperative Extension Fairfield County (Bethel) office: (203) 207-8440

Cooperative Extension Litchfield County (Torrington) office: (860) 626-6240

New York residents:

Cornell Cooperative Extension Westchester County office: (814) 285-4620

Cornell Cooperative Extension Dutchess County office: (914) 677-5006 for general information or (914) 677-5067 for Master Gardeners.

RECOMMENDED READING

I recommend two shorter books in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden series ("The Shady Border: Knockout Plants that Light Up the Shade" and "Woodland Gardens: Shade Gets Chic") as well as two older compendium-type books, "Made for the Shade" by Judy Glattstein and "Burpee Shade Gardening" by Anne Zeman.

SOURCES

Catskill Native Nursery

Kerhonkson, NY

<http://www.catskillnativenursery.com>

This is a retail nursery; they do not ship plants, so you must visit to purchase.

Earth Tones Native Plant Nursery

Woodbury, CT

<http://www.earthtonesnatives.com/>

Native Plant Center at Westchester Community College

Phone: (914) 606-7870

They have a plant sale the last weekend of April every year, with a pre-sale period beginning in January. I recommend purchasing during the pre-sale period. Otherwise, many things are sold out by the time the plant sale date rolls around.

Lazy S's Farm & Nursery

www.lazyssfarm.com (they do not accept phone calls—you must make inquiries using the Contact form at their website)

I have not purchased from them myself, but they seem to get good reviews from customers.

New England Wild Flower Society—Garden in the Woods, Framingham, Mass.

www.newenglandwild.org—call to find out what they are offering for sale at the present time, how to get it, and ask about special events.

If you have never gone there, this would make a wonderful outing for any group. The time to visit is MAY.

Sunshine Farm and Gardens

www.sunfarn.com

Ward's Nursery—Great Barrington, Mass.

(413) 528-0166

Stock a good selection of native plants. Call before making the trek if you're interested in something specific. They will special order.

OR...special order from your usual retail nursery

I find that a lot of people don't realize they can do this. The time to place special orders is January-March, but things can be available later and even if they are sold out for spring, many plants become available again in fall.