

Great Gardens are Possible in Deep Shade

by Jim Briand, Trees for Watertown

When we think of gardens, we tend to conjure up bright yellow, red, and orange blooms. Often homeowners will cut back trees on their property to encourage such displays. Yet nothing can be more soothing than a well-crafted shade garden. By working with trees instead of against them, beautiful and peaceful outcomes are possible.

The key to success in building a shade garden is choosing the right plants. Trying to grow sun-loving flowers under a mature shade tree is an exercise in futility. The plants may come up, but they will often fail to reach their full potential or produce only leaves.

The roots of some trees, like Black Walnut, are allelopathic, meaning they exude chemicals that inhibit the growth of other plants. Other trees when mature can have such dense root structures that most flowering plants simply can't thrive under them. Norway Maples are notorious for this.

So how can you have both the cooling beauty of a mature shade tree and the joy of a thriving garden?

- Start by working with the seasonal leaf cycle of your tree. Tulips and daffodils planted under a deciduous tree will deliver a blanket of color in April and early May before the tree leafs out.
- Choose plants that are suitable for “full shade.” Plants that are labelled Part Shade or Part Sun often fail in a truly shady environment.
- There are some bright-flowering plants that do fine in shade, like impatiens, but consider building a palette of many shades of green and subtle flowers. There are many beautiful native plants that do well in shade while helping support native insect species.
- Successful shade gardens will include a wide variety of leaf textures. Hosta can hold its own even planted under Norway Maples, and a nice mixture of Hosta varieties alone can deliver an inviting experience. Other favorites that can do well in deep shade include ferns, Fox Glove, Begonias, and carpets of different ground covers.

No matter what season you plant for, avoid cutting tree roots larger than a half inch in diameter, and be sure to cut roots off cleanly so that the tree can heal quickly. This will help your tree stay healthy -- torn roots invite fungal infection.

An ingenious alternative to planting in the ground is gardening in pots. This delivers two benefits: first, it saves having to dig in hard soil full of tree roots, which is easier on you and better for the tree. Second, a little extra filtered light can make a great difference for some plants, so just move the pots around until you find the perfect site for each plant.

Using these approaches you can have it all—the cooling shade of a mature tree and the beauty of a well-crafted garden.