

Landscaping in Florida Shade¹

Sydney Park Brown²

Trees and the shade they cast provide welcome relief from Florida's intense sun and heat, but gardening in shade can be challenging.

Lawn grasses are especially difficult to grow in moderate to deep shade. They typically need at least 6 hours of sun, although certain species and cultivars can adapt to less. Additionally, most vegetables and fruit crops demand extended periods of full sun to produce well.

Shade shifts daily, seasonally, and over time as trees grow. Carefully analyzing *where* and *when* shade occurs is a first step. Also, recognizing *types* of shade is important as some kinds of shade are suitable for growing plants while other types are very problematic.

For example, many shade-tolerant plants prefer the following conditions:

- Four or fewer hours of full sun, preferably morning or evening
- Dappled shade all day
- High, shifting shade (pine shade)

Examples of difficult shade include the following areas:

- Dense and dark (no sun)
- In the shadow of buildings
- Dominated by tree roots
- Very wet or dry

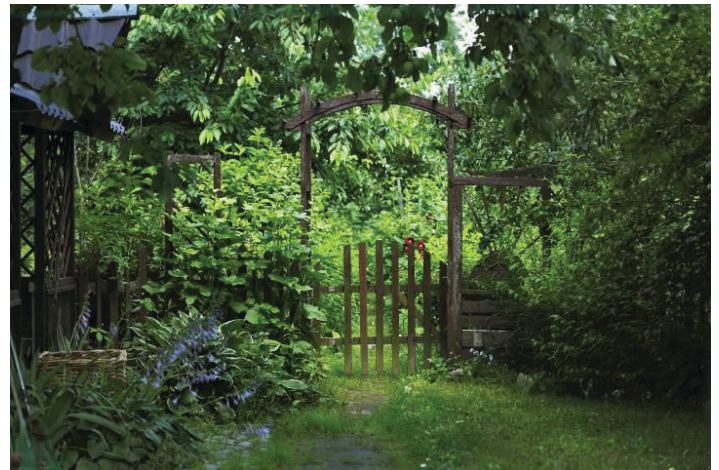


Figure 1.
Credits: Bart_Kowski/iStock/Thinkstock.com

Sometimes difficult shade can be improved by lifting or thinning the tree canopy or large shrubs so more sun or indirect light can penetrate. Keep in mind that there are right and (very) wrong ways to prune trees. Rely on a professional, such as an ISA Certified Arborist, to do the job. See <https://www.treesaregood.org/findanarborist> to find an ISA Certified Arborist.

Sometimes the best solution for difficult shade is to forget trying to establish plants in the area; instead convert it to an outdoor garden room enhanced by seating, garden art, mulch, hardscape, a water feature, a birdbath, or other focal points. Where possible, shade-tolerant plants (see below) can be grown in colorful containers where they will not have to compete with tree roots. Leave the leaf litter that falls and allow these areas to be “self-mulching.”

1. This document is ENH1196, one of a series of the Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date February 2012. Revised October 2015, October 2018, and February 2024. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Sydney Park Brown, associate professor emerita, Environmental Horticulture Department; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.



Figure 2. An outdoor garden room with seating, garden art, mulch, hardscape, a water feature, a birdbath, or other focal points is sometimes the best solution for difficult shade.

Credits: Ratana21/iStock/Thinkstock.com

The following types of plants are generally good candidates for shade:

- Plants with broad leaves
- Foliage plants (houseplants) for cold-protected areas of south and central Florida or for use as cold-tender annuals (Table 3)
- Most ferns
- Numerous tropical perennials in the Acanthaceae family (Table 2)
- Woodland native plants

Tables 1, 2, and 3 list some plants that tolerate reduced sunlight. These lists are not exhaustive.

Every plant has cultural needs besides light. Make sure to select plants that are suited to the site (“right plant, right place”).

A few other considerations when growing plants in shade include the following:

- Areas under tree canopy tend to be warmer, frost-free spots more amenable to cold-tender plants.
- Digging among the roots of trees and shrubs is difficult, so start with smaller plants that do not need a large planting hole. Water them frequently until they are established.
- Fertilizer cannot compensate for inadequate light. It is not a substitute for photosynthesis.
- Shaded lawns should be mowed higher and receive less fertilizer, water, and traffic.
- For color in shady areas, use plants that produce light-colored flowers. Dark flowers do not show up as well.

- Your local UF/IFAS Extension office can verify the reliability of a plant in your county (<http://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/find-your-local-office/>).

Additional Resources

Chaplin, L. T., and M. M. Brandies. 1998. *The Florida Gardener's Book of Lists*. Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing.

Dehgan, B. 1998. *Landscape Plants for Subtropical Climates*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

UF/IFAS. 2010. *The Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Guide to Plant Selection & Landscape Design*. https://fsl.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/FYN_Plant_Selection_Guide_2015.pdf

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Ed Thralls, horticulture agent, UF/IFAS Extension Orange County, for reviewing this publication and Wendy Wilber, coordinator, Florida Master Gardener Program, for her contributions.

Table 1. Selected shade-tolerant plants for north (N), central (C), and south (S) Florida.

Plant	Region
Turf	
St. Augustinegrass dwarf cultivars ('Sapphire', 'Seville', 'Delmar', and 'Captiva')	NCS
Zoysiagrass cultivars (e.g., 'Empire')	NC
Centipedegrass	N
Small trees (under 30')	
Devil's walkingstick (<i>Aralia spinosa</i>)*	NC
Dahoon holly (<i>Ilex cassine</i>)*	NCS
Dogwood (<i>Cornus florida</i>)*	NC
Pond apple (<i>Annona glabra</i>)*	S
Red buckeye (<i>Aesculus pavia</i>)*	NC
Redbud (<i>Cercis canadensis</i>)*	NC
Silverbell (<i>Halesia</i> spp.)*	N
Snowbell (<i>Styrax americanus</i>)*	NCS
Sparkleberry (<i>Vaccinium arboreum</i>)*	NC
Spicewood (<i>Calyptranthes pallens</i>)*	S
Swamp dogwood (<i>Cornus foemina</i>)*	NCS
Walter's viburnum (<i>Viburnum obovatum</i>)*	NCS
Yaupon (<i>Ilex vomitoria</i>)*	NCS
Palms/cycads	
Bamboo palm (<i>Chamadorea</i> spp.)	CS
Blue-stem/dwarf palmetto (<i>Sabal minor</i>)*	NCS
Coontie (<i>Zamia floridana</i>)*	NCS
Dwarf Sugar Palm (<i>Arenga engleri</i>)	CS
Lady palm (<i>Rhapis excelsa</i>)	CS
Needle palm (<i>Rhapidophyllum hystrix</i>)*	NCS
Saw palmetto (<i>Serenoa repens</i>)*	NCS
Shrubs	
Arrowwood (<i>Viburnum dentatum</i>)*	NC
Azalea (<i>Rhododendron</i> cultivars)	NC
Aucuba (<i>Aucuba japonica</i>)	NC
Anise—Florida (<i>Illicium floridanum</i>)*	NCS
Anise—yellow (<i>Illicium parviflorum</i>)	NCS
Banana shrub (<i>Magnolia figo</i>)	NC
Beautyberry (<i>Callicarpa americana</i>)*	NCS
Camellia (<i>C. japonica</i> , <i>C. sasanqua</i>)	NC
Cleyera (<i>Ternstroemia gymnanthera</i>)	NC
Crape jasmine/Pinwheel jasmine (<i>Tabernaemontana divaricata</i>)	CS
Dwarf schefflera (<i>Schefflera arboricola</i>)	CS
Dwarf Walter's viburnum (<i>Viburnum obovatum</i> —dwarf cultivars)*	NCS
Fatsia (<i>Fatsia japonica</i>)	NCS
Fetterbush (<i>Lyonia lucida</i>)*	NCS
Firebush (<i>Hamelia patens</i>)*	NCS
Florida azalea (<i>Rhododendron austrinum</i>)*	N
Gallberry (<i>Ilex glabra</i>)*	NCS
Gardenia (<i>Gardenia augusta</i>)	NCS

Plant	Region
Hydrangea (<i>Hydrangea macrophylla</i>)	NC
Mahonia (<i>Mahonia fortunei</i>)	NC
Marlberry (<i>Ardisia escallonioides</i>)*	CS
Myrsine (<i>Rapanea punctata</i>)*	S
Oakleaf hydrangea (<i>Hydrangea quercifolia</i>)*	NC
Pinxter azalea (<i>Rhododendron canescens</i>)*	NC
Pipestem (<i>Agarista populifolia</i>)*	NC
Sandankwa viburnum (<i>Viburnum suspensum</i>)	NCS
Scorpion tail (<i>Heliotropium angiospermum</i>)*	NCS
Simpson's stopper (<i>Myrcianthes fragrans</i>)*	NCS
Snailseed (<i>Cocculus laurifolius</i>)	CS
Summersweet (<i>Clethra alnifolia</i>)	NC
Strawberry bush (<i>Euonymus americanus</i>)*	NC
String lily (<i>Crinum americanum</i>)*	NCS
Sweetshrub (<i>Calycanthus floridus</i>)*	NC
Tea olive (<i>Osmanthus fragrans</i>)	NC
Virginia willow (<i>Itea virginica</i>)*	NC
Walter's viburnum (<i>Viburnum obovatum</i>)*	NC
Wax myrtle (<i>Myrica cerifera</i>)*	NCS
Wild coffee (<i>Psychotria nervosa</i>)*	CS
Witch hazel (<i>Hamamelis virginiana</i>)*	NC
Yesterday, today and tomorrow (<i>Brunfelsia</i> spp.)	NCS
Ornamental Grasses	
River oats (<i>Chasmanthium latifolium</i>)*	NC
Ferns	
Autumn fern (<i>Dryopteris erythrsora</i>)	NCS
Chain ferns (<i>Woodwardia</i> spp.)*	NCS
Cinnamon fern (<i>Osmunda cinnamomea</i>)*	NCS
Hart's tongue fern (<i>Asplenium scolopendrium</i>)	NC
Holly fern (<i>Cyrtomium falcatum</i>)	NCS
Japanese painted fern (<i>Athyrium niponicum</i> 'Pictum')	N
Leather fern (<i>Acrostichum danaeifolium</i>)	CS
Leatherleaf fern (<i>Rumohra adiantiformis</i>)	CS
Southern shield fern (<i>Thelypteris kunthii</i>)*	NCS
Royal fern (<i>Osmunda regalis</i>)*	NCS
Southern woods fern (<i>Dryopteris normalis</i>)*	NCS
Sword ferns (<i>Nephrolepis biserrata</i> and <i>N. exaltata</i>)*	CS
Swamp fern (<i>Blechnum serrulatum</i>)*	NCS
Silver-leaf brake fern (<i>Pteris ensiformis</i> 'Victoriae')	CS
Virginia chain fern (<i>Woodwardia virginica</i>)*	NCS
Groundcovers	
African hosta (<i>Drimiopsis maculata</i>)	NCS
Artillery fern (<i>Pilea microphylla</i>)	CS
Asiatic jasmine (<i>Trachelospermum asiaticum</i>)	NCS
Aztec grass (<i>Ophiopogon intermedius</i>)	NCS

Plant	Region
Cast iron plant (<i>Aspidistra elatior</i>)	NCS
Creeping yew (<i>Cephalotaxusharringtonia</i> 'Prostrata')	CS
Florida violets (<i>Viola</i> spp.)	NCS
Mondo grass (<i>Ophiopogon japonicus</i>)	NCS
Strawberry begonia (<i>Saxifraga stolonifera</i>)	NCS
Turtle vine/Bolivian Jew (<i>Callisia repens</i>)	CS
* Native Florida plant	

Table 2. Colorful annuals and perennials.

Common name	Scientific name
Bromeliads	<i>Aechmea</i> , <i>Bilbergia</i> , and <i>Neoregelia</i> spp.
Blood lily	<i>Haemanthus multiflorus</i>
Blue ginger	<i>Dichorisandra thyrsiflora</i>
Blue sage	<i>Eranthemum pulchellum</i>
Butterfly gingers	<i>Hedychium</i> spp.
Caladium	<i>Caladium</i> x <i>hortulanum</i>
Coleus	<i>Solenostemon scutellarioides</i>
Crossandra	<i>Crossandra infundibuliformis</i>
Firespike	<i>Odontonema strictum</i>
Dancing girl ginger	<i>Globba bulbifera</i>
Ground orchid	<i>Spathoglottis</i> spp.
Hostas	<i>Hosta</i> hybrids, such as 'Sunhosta', 'Royal Standard', 'Elegans', 'Patriot', and 'Frances Williams'
Impatiens	<i>Impatiens</i> spp.
Jacobinia	<i>Justicia carnea</i>
Jewels of Opar	<i>Talinum paniculatum</i> 'Variegata'
Kaffir lily	<i>Clivia miniata</i>
Leopard plant	<i>Farfugium japonicum</i>
Nun's orchid	<i>Phaius tankervilliae</i>
Ornamental sweet potato	<i>Ipomoea batatas</i>
Peacock gingers	<i>Kaempferia</i> spp.
Persian shield	<i>Strobilanthes dyerianus</i>
Polka dot plant	<i>Hypoestes phyllostachya</i>
Red flame ivy	<i>Hemigraphis alternata</i>
Sanchezia	<i>Sanchezia nobilis</i>
Shell ginger	<i>Alpinia zerumbet</i>
Toad lilies	<i>Tricyrtis</i> spp.
Walking irises	<i>Neomarica</i> spp.
Wax Begonia	<i>Begonia cuculata</i> (Manage to prevent escape into natural areas.)
Wishbone flower	<i>Torenia fournieri</i>
Yellow shrimp plant	<i>Pachystachys lutea</i>

Table 3. Assorted foliage plants (houseplants) for south Florida and cold-protected areas of central Florida.

Common name	Scientific name
Chinese evergreen	<i>Aglaonema</i> spp.
Amazon lily	<i>Eucharis amazonica</i>
Anthurium	<i>Anthurium</i> spp.
Aralia	<i>Polyscias</i> spp.
Calathea	<i>Calathea</i> spp.
Ti plant	<i>Cordyline</i> spp.
Dracaena	<i>Dracaena</i> spp.
False aralia	<i>Dizygotheca elegantissima</i>
Prayer plant	<i>Maranta</i> spp.
Peace lily	<i>Spathiphyllum</i> spp.
Triostar	<i>Stromanthe sanguinea</i> 'Triostar'
ZZ plant	<i>Zamioculcas zamiifolia</i>