



Perennials for Shady Areas

For some gardeners, shady areas are problem spots in the home landscape. Many plants, however, perform well in shady areas. Selecting and planting shade-tolerant perennials, annuals, trees, and shrubs can turn a shady site into an attractively landscaped area.

The following perennials are good choices for partially to heavily shaded locations.

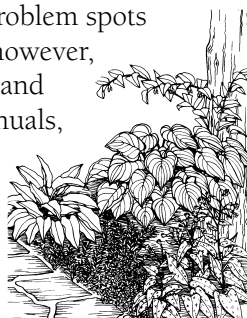


Illustration by Susan Aldworth

Astilbe (*Astilbe* species)

The attractive foliage and flowers of astilbes are excellent additions to partially shaded sites. Numerous varieties are available. Foliage color varies from dark green to reddish green. Flowers are produced on erect or arching stems. Flower colors include white, pink, red, and lavender. Astilbe varieties range in height from 6 to 8 inches up to 3 to 4 feet. Astilbes perform best in moist, well-drained soils. In hot, dry locations, astilbe foliage turns brown and dies prematurely.



Barrenwort (*Epimedium* species)

Barrenwort is an excellent groundcover for partial to heavy shade. Plants commonly grow 8 to 12 inches tall and have green, heart-shaped leaves. In spring, the leaves are often tinted red. Barrenwort produces small, columbine-like flowers in spring. Flowers may be white, pink, red, or yellow. Barrenwort performs best in moist, well-drained soils (containing large amounts of organic matter) in partial shade.

Creeping phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*)

Creeping phlox is an excellent low-growing groundcover for partial shade. (*Phlox subulata* also is frequently referred to as creeping phlox, but it requires full sun.) *Phlox stolonifera* produces low mats of foliage. Plants bloom in

spring on 6- to 8-inch flowering stems. Excellent varieties include 'Blue Ridge', 'Pink Ridge', 'Bruce's White', 'Home Fires', and 'Sherwood Purple'. Creeping phlox requires moist, well-drained soils.

Goat's beard (*Aruncus dioicus*)

A native of woodlands in eastern Iowa, goat's beard may grow 4 to 6 feet tall and 6 feet wide. Its pinnately compound leaves are 2 to 3 feet long. Dense spikes of creamy white flowers are produced in late spring/early summer. It prefers moist soils and partial shade. Because of its large size, goat's beard is best used as a background plant or in the center of large beds.

Dwarf goat's beard (*Aruncus aethusifolius*) is ideal for small sites. This Korean native produces finely dissected foliage and cream-colored flowers in early summer. Plants are approximately 1 foot tall.

Hosta (*Hosta* species)

Hostas have few peers in the shade garden. They are easy to grow, low maintenance perennials. Hundreds of varieties are available to the home gardener. Varieties differ in leaf color, texture, and shape. The foliage may be green, blue, gold, or variegated. Leaf textures include smooth, glossy, dull, seersuckered, or leathery. The leaves may be long and narrow, nearly round, or heart-shaped. Hosta varieties also exhibit diversity in plant height and flower characteristics. Varieties range in height from 3 inches to 4 feet. Flowers may be white, blue, or purple. The flowers of some varieties are highly fragrant.

Hostas can be used as a groundcover or as specimen plants. Most grow best in partial to heavy shade. However, the gold-leaved varieties develop their best color in areas that receive 3 to 4 hours of direct sun each day. The color intensity of the blue-leaved hostas is best in heavy shade.

Lungwort (*Pulmonaria* species)

These clump-forming perennials can be grown as specimen plants or as a groundcover in partial to full shade. The foliage of most species and varieties is green with white

or silver spots. However, some of the newer varieties have essentially silver leaves with green margins. In addition to the attractive foliage, lungworts also produce white, pink, or blue flowers in spring. The common name refers to the purported value of the leaves in the treatment of lung diseases.



Siberian bugloss (*Brunnera macrophylla*)

This shade-tolerant perennial produces blue, forget-me-not-like flowers in early spring. Its large, basal leaves are heart-shaped and remain attractive until frost. Other common names for the plant are heartleaf brunnera and false forget-me-not. Plants perform best in moist, well-drained soils in partial shade.



Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum species*)

The graceful, arching stems of Solomon's seal are common in woodland areas throughout Iowa. The long, unbranched stems may be up to 4 to 6 feet long. The above-ground stems originate from thick, horizontal, underground stems or rhizomes.

Solomon's seal bears yellowish-green to greenish-white flowers in May or June. The flowers hang in clusters from the leaf axils. The flowers are followed by dime-size berries that turn blue-black in late summer.

Solomon's seal freely reseeds itself. As a result, it is best grown in naturalized areas rather than well-maintained landscapes.

The foliage of the variegated Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum odoratum* "Variegatum") has green leaves edged in creamy white. Solomon's seal prefers heavy shade and cool, moist soils. Plant several rhizomes (five or more) in an area for greater visual impact.

Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*)

This native woodland flower blooms in early spring. The flowers are borne in nodding clusters. The flower buds are pink, opening to light blue flowers. Plants die back to the ground by early summer. Virginia bluebells perform best in moist, well-drained soil in partial shade.



Woodland phlox (*Phlox divaricata*)

Commonly found in moist, partially shaded woodland sites throughout Iowa, woodland phlox produce white to blue to violet flowers in April or May. Plants are typically 12 to 15 inches tall. Woodland phlox freely reseeds itself in favorable sites.

More choices

The following perennials also perform well in partial to heavy shade.

- Black snakeroot (*Actaea racemosa*)
- Red baneberry (*Actaea rubra*)
- Maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum*)
- Bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans*)
- Columbine (*Aquilegia species*)
- Jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*)
- Wild ginger (*Asarum species*)
- Japanese painted fern (*Athyrium niponicum* var. *pictum*)
- Turtlehead (*Chelone species*)
- Bleeding heart (*Dicentra species*)
- Sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*)
- Crested iris (*Iris cristata*)
- Yellow archangel (*Lamium galeobdolon*)
- Spotted deadnettle (*Lamium maculatum*)
- Cinnamon fern (*Osmunda cinnamomea*)
- Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*)
- Celandine poppy (*Stylophorum diphyllum*)
- Foam flower (*Tiarella cordifolia*)

For more information

Additional information is in "Perennials for Shade" (PM 1913) available from your local Iowa State University Extension office and from these websites:

<https://store.extension.iastate.edu>

<https://hortnews.extension.iastate.edu>

<https://www.reimangardens.com>

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