

August 23, 2018



Shade Gardening in a Mediterranean Climate
By Susan Corey-McAlpine
UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

There is possibly no more perfect gardening activity for these hot summer afternoons than planning a shade garden, a haven of private coolness. The gardening climate of El Dorado County mimics that in Chile, Australia, and parts of the Middle East, where we have the “Mediterranean climate” of wet winters and hot, dry summers. Our gardens are usually “dry” spots, growing in a specific cycle of hot and cold. To succeed, the shade garden must be preplanned and well thought-out, with preparations for a fall planting. Planting in the fall allows new plants to expand their roots in warm soil and be more ready for spring growth than if you wait for spring.

What should be your considerations for planning the shade garden? First is each plant’s exposure to sun, defined in one of four categories.

Full sun is more than 6 hours daily.

Part sun is 4 to 5 hours daily

Part shade is 1 to 2 hours of sun exposure daily.

Full shade is less than 1 hour daily.

A plant’s shade requirements can be found on the nursery hangtag or in a general gardening book. Note that shade is also related to the angle of the sun - determined by the time of year, and that canopy shade from a deciduous tree is provided only in certain months. And note that some shade is static - as at the base of your house, while some dappled sun from a light canopy casts moving shade on the garden.

August 23, 2018

Secondly, select plants depending on their need for acid or alkaline soils and group them accordingly. You might want to pair the shallow-rooted maple with like-rooted rhododendrons. And speaking of roots: don't forget to tread lightly (or not at all) at the base of oak trees. Oaks don't like their roots crowded or damaged with surface plantings, and oaks won't survive any additional water required by shade plants. We would recommend not adding a layer of soil deeper than 2 inches over oak roots. Adding soil might nurture shade plants under an oak canopy but it is not helpful to the oak. And ultimately, we probably would choose to protect our heritage oaks rather than to indulge the shade garden's plants. A thought: use planters instead for shade plants under oaks.

Thirdly, don't assume that your shade garden must have uniform green foliage and don't feel resigned to an expanse of "no color." There are a wealth of sizes, shapes, textures, and shades of greens and colors in shade-loving plants: examples are Bear's breech (*Acanthus mollis*) with large interesting leaves and spikes of white bloom, the laciness of a columbine (*Aquilegia*) with its geometric, dual-colored flowers, and the dark gloss of azalea leaves and elegant spring bloom. Search a local nursery for drought-tolerant rhododendrons (who knew?) and other shade plants specially propagated for our Mediterranean climate.

I hope that I have sparked your interest and enthusiasm for the shade garden. Hungry for more information? Check out the archived articles at our website (<http://ucanr.edu/edmg>). Merry Campbell, who chairs the Shade Garden at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden has written several articles which expand on this topic. The Sherwood Demonstration Garden is open to the public with sixteen distinct gardens full of ideas for the home gardener. Further, join us for a special treat when Merry Campbell, E.J. Kipping, and I will be presenting a free public class, "Shade Gardening in our Mediterranean Climate" on Saturday, August 25, 9 a.m. to noon, at the Government Center, Building C Hearing Room, 2850 Fairlane Court in Placerville. We will have slides and lists of shade plants for every need and answers for all your questions.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind the Folsom Lake College-El Dorado Center. We're open 9:00 a.m. to noon, Fridays and Saturdays.

For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.