

The 18 Best Perennial Plants for Shade

By **BH&G Garden Editors** | Updated February 19, 2016

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Brighten up sheltered spots in your landscape with these easy-to-grow, colorful shade plants that come back year after year. These pretty shade perennials can make masked areas the greatest points of interest in your garden.

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Bigroot Geranium

One of the toughest colorful plants that grow in shade gardens, bigroot geranium (*Geranium macrorrhizum*) doesn't mind heat or drought. And deer and rabbits typically pass these shade flowers by in search of tastier morsels. These colorful shade-loving perennials put on a spring show with pink or white flowers; some varieties also offer outstanding fall coloration in their woody-scented foliage. Bigroot geranium is hardy in Zones 4-8 and grows 2 feet tall.

Top Picks: 'Album' offers white shade flowers; 'Ingwersen's Variety' offers clear pink flowers; 'Variegatum' has purple-pink flowers and white-variegated leaves.

Plant It With: Add height and interest to shade gardens by planting bigroot geranium in front of toad lilies.



Toad Lily

Put on a shade-flowers show with toad lily (*Tricyrtis*). These easy-to-grow flowering shade plants offer unique flowers that are often compared to orchids. Many are spotted with shades of purple or blue.

Top Picks: 'White Towers' bears white flowers; 'Tojen' offers especially large lavender flowers.

Plant It With: Let toad lily rise up in shade gardens behind a clump of medium-size hostas or fern-leaf bleeding heart.



Ajuga

One of the best perennial plants for shade, these top-notch shade perennials are grown mainly for foliage, but they also bloom blue flowers in the spring. Select varieties of this shade plant offer dark purple or variegated foliage, or pink or white flowers. Ajuga grows best in Zones 3-9 and grows only 6 inches tall.

Test Garden Tip: Ajuga can be a vigorous spreader; it's not the best choice for small spaces.

Top Picks: 'Golden Glow' has creamy-yellow edges; 'Black Scallop' offers shiny, dark purple leaves and fragrant blue flowers; 'Burgundy Glow' offers silvery-green leaves splashed with pink and burgundy; 'Chocolate Chip' offers smaller, purple-infused leaves.

Plant It With: Purple-leaf ajuga varieties look great against blue hostas in shade gardens.



Old-Fashioned Bleeding Heart

There's little wonder why old-fashioned bleeding heart (*Dicentra spectabilis*) is a favorite of colorful shade plants. In late spring and early summer, it produces pink or white heart-shaped shade flowers that hang from elegant, arching stems. This top-notch plant is hardy in Zones 3-9 and grows up to 4 feet tall.

Test Garden Tip: By midsummer, old-fashioned bleeding heart usually goes dormant and loses its foliage. Plant it with astilbe or hosta so you don't end up with a bare spot in your shade gardens.

Top Picks: 'Pantaloons' is a variety with large numbers of pure white flowers. 'Gold Heart' bears bright golden leaves against the pink flowers.

Plant It With: You can't go wrong by planting bleeding heart with ferns. Be sure to stay in the shade, though—fern foliage can easily burn in the sun.



Hosta

Hostas are among the showiest and easiest-to-grow shade perennials. They also offer the most variety of any perennial plants for shade. Choose from miniatures that stay only a couple inches wide or giants that sprawl 6 feet across or more. Look for leaves in shades of green, blue, white, chartreuse, and gold, with many cultivars being variegated. Some hosta flowers are very fragrant. Hostas are hardy in Zones 3-8.

Top Picks: 'Blue Mouse Ears' offers silvery-blue leaves and stays 1 foot wide; 'Frances Williams' offers thick, blue-green leaves edged in chartreuse and grows 2 feet wide; 'Sum and Substance' offers chartreuse leaves and grows 6 feet wide.

Plant It With: Old-fashioned bleeding heart, which typically goes dormant in summer.



Lungwort

A great choice for colorful shade plants but with an unfortunate name, lungwort (*Pulmonaria*) earned its moniker from the silvery, lung-shaped spots that dot the foliage of these flowering shade plants. The variegated foliage looks great all season long, but it's an especially nice accent to the clusters of pink, white, or blue flowers in spring. Lungwort grows best in Zones 4-8 and reaches 1 foot tall.

Test Garden Tip: Because its foliage is somewhat hairy, deer and rabbits typically leave lungwort alone.

Top Picks: 'Opal' features ice-blue flowers; 'Trevi Fountain' features cobalt-blue blooms.

Plant It With: Japanese painted fern or 'Jack Frost' brunnera for a delightful silver-on-silver play in shade gardens.





Yellow Corydalis

These hardworking perennials take the prize for being the longest bloomers in the sheltered garden shade. Enjoy the clusters of yellow flowers from late spring all the way to frost. It's not just the flowers of yellow corydalis that are beautiful; the gray-green leaves of these colorful shade plants are attractive as well. The plant grows about 12 inches tall and is hardy in Zones 5-8.

Test Garden Tip: This plant can be a prolific self-seeder.

Top Picks: *Corydalis lutea* is the easiest to grow and the longest blooming. White corydalis (*Corydalis ochroleuca*) also flowers over an extended period.

Plant It With: Accent the plant's bright flowers against dark green hellebore or hosta foliage in shade gardens.



Deadnettle

Starting in mid-spring, Deadnettle (*Lamium*) produces clusters of pink or white flowers. This delightful perennial for shade that blooms all summer creating months of color. And even when it's not blooming, the silver-infused foliage of these flowering shade plants brightens shady corners. Deadnettle usually stays about 8 inches tall and grows best in Zones 4-8.

Tip: Keep deadnettle looking good by keeping it moist. If it dries out too much, the leaves will develop brown edges.

Top Picks: 'White Nancy' offers white flowers and silver foliage with a green edge; 'Beacon Silver' bears pink flowers and silvery leaves.

Plant It With: Let deadnettle cover the ground in shade gardens underneath a colony of martagon lilies or an understory tree such as redbud.



Barrenwort

The underused perennial that deserves more attention, barrenwort (*Epimedium*) has it all when it comes to shade perennials. The groundcover blooms in spring in shades of red, orange, yellow, pink, purple, or white; it tolerates dry shade and it's deer- and rabbit-resistant. Some varieties are evergreen in mild-winter areas; others offer good fall color. Most types grow best in Zones 5-9 and reach about 1 foot tall.

Top Picks: 'Niveum' offers pure white flowers; 'Sulfureum' offers yellow blooms.

Plant It With: Create delightful contrast in shade gardens with barrenwort's shield-shape foliage against the lacy leaves of yellow corydalis.



Brunnera

In spring, shade gardens sparkle with the sky blue shade flowers of *Brunnera*. When not in bloom, its large, robustly textured leaves continue to look great—especially if you grow a variegated type of these perennials. While the plant is often short-lived, it does tend to self-seed, becoming a long-term presence in the garden shade.

Test Garden Tip: *Brunnera* is somewhat deer- and rabbit-resistant.

Top Picks: 'Hadspen Cream' offers green leaves broadly edged in creamy white; 'Jack Frost' has green leaves heavily overlaid with silver.

Plant It With: Go for a lovely blue-on-blue combination in shade gardens with forget-me-not.



Hellebore

Hellebore (*Helleborus*), also called Christmas rose, is one of the earliest bloomers of flowering shade plants. Look for its burgundy, pink, cream, green, or white shade flowers in late winter or early spring. Although it looks delicate, the Christmas rose is quite sturdy once it gets established. And it's deer- and rabbit-resistant. Hellebore grows best in Zones 4-8 and reaches 12 inches tall.

Top Picks: The Heronswood Double strain offers frilly, petal-packed blooms in a wide range of colors; the Royal Heritage strain offers single blooms in a wide range of colors.

Plant It With: Gold-leaf coralbells such as 'Lime Rickey' or 'Citronelle' in shade gardens, which will shine even brighter against dark green hellebore leaves.



Astilbe

Enjoy the feathery shade flowers of astilbe in early summer. This tough perennial blooms in shades of burgundy, red, pink, lavender, and white. In addition to the attractive flowers, these colorful shade plants have finely cut foliage, which in many varieties is flushed with bronze. Astilbe grows best in Zones 4-8 and can reach up to 4 feet tall, depending on variety.

Test Garden Tip: Astilbe needs consistently moist soil to thrive, so it's a good choice for shade gardens that don't drain well.

Top Picks: 'Deutschland' bears pure white flowers; 'Fanal' offers dark red plums and bronzy foliage; 'Sprite' is an award-winning selection with shell-pink blooms.

Plant It With: 'Britt-Marie Crawford' ligularia, which features dramatic purple foliage and golden-orange flowers. It also prefers wet soil.



The Best Perennial Plants for Shade

Plant these blooms in the shade just once and they'll come back for seasons to come. See some of our all-time top plants for shade.



Japanese Painted Fern

It's tough to imagine lovelier colorful shade perennials than Japanese painted ferns (*Athyrium niponicum* var. *pictum*). This beauty offers fronds liberally dappled with silver, burgundy, and green. Plus, it's a low-growing, slow-spreading plant for shady areas. Deer and rabbits usually leave it alone. It grows best in Zones 5-8 and gets about 12 inches tall.

Top Picks: 'Silver Falls' has especially metallic leaves; 'Burgundy Lace' has lots of rich purple-red tones in the leaves.

Plant It With: 'Burgundy Glow' ajuga or 'Green Spice' coralbells—all have silvery and purple tones in their foliage.



Wild Ginger

Hailing from the woodlands of North America, wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) is one of the toughest shade plants. It produces fuzzy, heart-shaped leaves that look great from spring to fall. And it's rarely bothered by deer and rabbits. This slow grower eventually forms an impressive clump. It grows best in Zones 2-8 and reaches 6 inches tall.

Top Picks: Wild ginger is a lovely deciduous type. European wild ginger (*Asarum europaeum*) offers shiny evergreen heart-shaped leaves. Zones 4-8.

Plant It With: Wild ginger looks beautiful with fern-leaf bleeding heart in shade gardens.



Japanese Forestgrass

Japanese forestgrass (*Hakonechloa macra*) is a wonderful grass for shade. It offers a lovely waterfall-like habit, and variegated varieties have bright gold, yellow, or white in the foliage. In fall, the leaves of these colorful shade plants usually pick up beautiful reddish tones. It grows best in Zones 5-9 and grows a foot tall.

Top Picks: 'Aureola' bears bright yellow leaves with dark green edges; 'All Gold' has even brighter golden foliage.

Plant It With: Add zing to garden shade by planting Japanese forestgrass in shade gardens with a bold golden hosta.



Lilyturf

Lilyturf (*Liriope*) is an easy-to-grow favorite of the flowering shade plants. Loved for its grassy foliage and spikes of blue or white flowers in late summer, as well as its resistance to deer and rabbits, lilyturf is practically a plant-and-forget-it garden resident. It grows best in Zones 5-10 and grows a foot tall.

Test Garden Tip: Lilyturf can be a fast, almost aggressive spreader when it's happy.

Top Picks: 'Majestic' offers narrower leaves and deep purple-blue flowers; 'Silver Dragon' offers boldly variegated foliage and violet-blue blooms.

Plant It With: Create an interesting look in shade gardens by planting Japanese forestgrass with a deep green lilyturf.



Monkshood

Monkshood (*Aconitum*) is a noteworthy plant among perennials for shady areas because it blooms in late summer when most other shade flowers have finished. Plus, it's deer- and rabbit-resistant. Named for its drooping blue flowers that resemble the hood on a monk's robe, this lovely shade plant is an easy, underused plant. It grows best in Zones 3-7 and reaches up to 6 feet tall.

Top Picks: 'Bressingham Spire' offers violet-blue flowers on 3-foot-tall plants; 'Stainless Steel' offers steel-blue flowers on 4-foot-tall plants.

Plant It With: Kirengeshoma, a beautiful but underused perennial with bold foliage and yellow flowers in late summer.



Top Shade Garden Plants

Discover beautiful and easy-to-grow colorful shade plants to add interest to shady gardens.



Fern-Leaf Bleeding Heart

Fern-leaf bleeding heart (*Dicentra eximia* and *D. formosa*) looks beautiful all season. These shade plants bloom on and off from spring to fall (if they get enough moisture during hot, dry periods), producing delicate clusters of pink, red, or white flowers. Even when not in bloom, their tidy mounds of blue-green, ferny foliage look great. They grow best in Zones 4-8 and grow up to 2 feet tall.

Top Picks: 'Bacchanal' offers dark red flowers; 'King of Hearts' offers rose-pink flowers and stays about 1 foot tall; 'Aurora' offers white blooms.

Plant It With: Create a subtle contrast in shade gardens by planting fern-leaf bleeding heart with yellow corydalis.