Here in the Piedmont of North Carolina, we are blessed with a moderate climate and four wonderful seasons. However, in July and August, when the dog days of summer are upon us, it often doesn’t feel very moderate. That is when you really appreciate the benefits of shade gardening. When the temperature soars, when it seems there is no respite from relentless heat and sun, a shade garden can provide an oasis—for you and for backyard wildlife. It is not just your imagination: the temperature can be up to 20 degrees cooler under a mature shade tree than in direct sun. The shade garden, however, is far more than a summer oasis. By careful planning and planting, you can have an interesting garden year round. In this article, let’s rediscover, season by season, some fabulous plants that bloom in the shade.

Winter. A shade garden provides a glimpse of spring all through winter, as many shade-loving plants bloom before there is a full canopy overhead.

- Camellias grow happily in the shade garden, with glossy leaves and large, showy rose-like blooms. There are hundreds of cultivars of Camellia japonica, which bloom from November through February, despite cold weather.
- Hellebores are among the most valuable perennials for the shade garden with evergreen foliage and a long bloom time. They thrive in light to heavy shade. Lenten Rose, *Helleborus orientalis*, is spectacular with beautiful rose-like flowers and leathery dark green leaves. These plants can bloom for up to three months.
- Daffodils start blooming in February. By careful selection from more than 13,000 different hybrids, you can have daffodils in your garden from late winter to late spring.
- Witch hazel, *Hamamelis virginiana*, is an under-storey shrub with bright yellow flowers on bare branches.
- Leatherleaf Mahonia, *Mahonia bealei*, has bright yellow blooms against shiny, dark green and leathery evergreen leaves. Bloom is followed by clusters of dark blue berries in summer.
- Fragrant Wintersweet, *Chimonanthus praecox*, has interesting and very fragrant yellow flowers.

Spring. When spring arrives the shade garden is stunning with dogwoods, azaleas and rhododendrons that burst into bloom. These Southern favorites transform a shade garden into a wonderland of white, pink, fuchsia and lavender, usually just in time for Easter. Other spring bloomers include:

- Bergenia, *Bergenia cordifolia*, forms spreading clumps with large evergreen leaves and deep pink blossoms in early spring. It likes rich, moist soil in partial shade.
- Ajuga, *Ajuga reptans*, makes a wonderful ground cover. It is especially useful in areas where grass won’t grow. Violet/blue bloom spikes pop above the dark foliage. ‘Bronze Beauty’ and ‘Jungle Beauty’ are two excellent cultivars.
- Goats Beard, *Aruncus dioicus*, grows into large clumps where its creamy white plumes make a bold display in partial shade.
- Solomon’s Seal, *Polygonatum biflorum*, blooms in partial to heavy shade in late spring, with beautiful creamy colored flowers on arching stems. It is a native wildflower in North Carolina.
Confederate Jasmine, *Trachelospermum Jasminoides*, is a rapid growing vine with evergreen foliage and white very fragrant flowers. It is a tough plant that tolerates drought, heat and wind. It can also be used as a ground cover.

Green and Gold, *Chrysothemum Virginianum*, is a North Carolina native that thrives in full to partial shade, with bright gold flowers above dark green foliage.

**Summer.** Following the spring parade of blooms, the ever-reliable hostas emerge. The right hosta can literally light up a shady corner. Many new hybrids provide a wide selection of color and texture with leaves of yellow, blue, green, chartreuse, and even orange, variegated or plain. From the diminutive ‘Blue Cadet’ to the giant ‘Sum and Substance’, the size, texture, shape and color possibilities are immense.

Other summer blooming shade plants include:
- Astilbe, *Astilbe X Arendsi*, has many good cultivars. Growing in moist soil and partial shade, beautiful panicles in white, pinks or reds appear above the deeply cut foliage.
- Gardenia, *Gardenia Augusta*, is a Southern favorite with dark green, glossy foliage and fabulous white, fragrant flowers. Plant where you can enjoy the sweet fragrance in light to moderate shade. Gardenias are drought tolerant, so they also grow well in pots.
- Hydrangeas are a magnificent addition to a shade garden. Well suited to our acidic soil, they grow best in partial shade. Hydrangeas add color with large, showy blooms of white, pink or blue. They also add garden interest when long past prime as blooms stay on the plant and change color with age. There are many new hydrangea cultivars on the market; however, two favorites are oldies but goodies: *Hydrangea macrophylla*, ‘Nikko Blue’ for its outrageously large, bright blue blooms; and Oakleaf Hydrangea, *Hydrangea Quercifolia*, for its large white flowers, deeply lobed leaves and fall foliage, which turns a gorgeous mahogany-red and stays on the plant until very late fall.
- Phlox, *Phlox Paniculata*, is a native in the Southeast, gracing many old gardens with pretty blooms in pink, white, blue and magenta. It does best in partial shade. Select cultivars that are resistant to powdery mildew.
- Crinum Lily, *Crinum Spp.*, is one of the South’s most common old garden plants. Crinum loves the Southern heat and thrives with very little care. The large, fragrant blooms are available in a range of colors from white to deep rose. The most common old crinum is ‘Milk and Wine’, which is white with faint red stripes. Plant the bulbs in light shade then leave them, as crinums do not like to be disturbed.

**Fall.** By fall, many Southern gardens are tired. Spruce up your garden with the following plants to enjoy more colorful blooms:
- Butterfly Ginger Lily, *Hedychium Coronarium*, is large and tropical in appearance, with foliage and blooms 5 feet tall, forming large clumps. *Hedychium* means ‘sweet snow’, perhaps referring to the sweetly fragrant white blooms. This tuberous plant thrives in partial shade in moist soil, and is a must have in the fall shade garden.
- Turtlehead, *Chelone Iyonii*, is a beautiful perennial, growing 2-4 feet high with dark foliage and gorgeous rose-purple flowers. Turtlehead prefers moist soil in partial shade. MM

Three non-copyrighted pictures were gleaned from the Internet to illustrate this article.

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