

Options for Shady Conditions

Although it is cooler there, landscaping in the shade can be a challenge, but not impossible. In fact, it can be fun to let go and be creative if a few facts are known and some simple rules followed.

First, there are two kinds of shade. One kind is from trees, especially those with low-hanging limbs that hide the sun and leave that unsightly bare spot underneath. Another kind of shade is structure shade from buildings and fences.

So, if trees are the issue, know that tree roots are huge consumers of both water and air (specifically, oxygen) to survive. Trees do not like water and air competition from other growth nearby and will take natural measure to protect itself, thus making it difficult to plant anything under it. First, decide if the tree stays and will be a focal point. If so, allow additional sunlight in for grasses and other plants to grow by raising the tree canopy. This is simply done by trimming off the lowest branches, leaving the remaining lowest branches at an even height above the ground.

If you are wanting to try grass in this area, avoid warm-weather grasses (Bermuda, Zoysiagrass, Buffalo grass) as they are not shade tolerant. They require at least 6-8 hours of direct sunlight. If you cannot provide that, lean towards cool-weather grasses (Tall Fescue, Kentucky Bluegrass, Perennial Ryegrass) which is more shade tolerant (it still needs some sun). The downside to this grass type is that they require more water and will struggle to survive during our extreme hot and dry conditions. For good survival rates, plant warm-weather grasses in the spring and cool-weather grasses in the fall.

Turfgrass alternatives can be used to create beautiful landscapes in shaded areas. Consider a ground cover. The roots will be less likely to compete with

the tree and there are many choices from which to choose. These can be planted directly in the ground with their edges kept trimmed with a weed eater or in a slightly raised bed (2-4" high) around the tree. Higher is not better. The higher the bed height around a tree, the more likely it will struggle to get ample water and oxygen and may become stressed. And stress can lead to disease. In conjunction with ground covers or instead of, go with shade-loving plants. Again, there are so many varieties out there. A listing of such can be found below.

The next best option is to plant artificial garden matter, which can also look attractive in bare spots. Gravel is one choice and comes in many sizes, shapes, and colors. Mexican beach pebbles (aka river rock) are a little more expensive but are extremely attractive. For a natural brown look, wood chips are a good option. Consider some type of border to avoid erosion or wash out.

As far as dealing with structure shade, again there is a wide variety of shrubs, vines, and tall vegetation that can be planted adjacent to buildings and fences. Let your mind go free and be creative. Consider side-by-side plants that have different leaf sizes, shapes, heights, and shades of green. Some easy-to-find choices are climbing ivies, climbing hydrangeas, coleus, and golden Hostas just to name a few.

Although there are many shade plants on the market, not all garden stores will carry a large variety of such these days. A specialty nursery, especially one that deals in shade plants, may be your better shopping option.

For more information on this subject, refer to OSU fact sheets HLA-6608 (Managing Turf Grass in the Shade). The back page contains an extensive list of shade-tolerant landscaping plants. Also, HLA-6418 (Selecting a Lawn Grass for Oklahoma) and HLA-6419 (Establishing a Lawn in Oklahoma) are useful resources. Most OSU fact sheets can be found and printed directly from Google.

Go have fun in the shade!