

Landscaping in Florida Shade¹

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Trees and the shade they cast provide welcome relief from Florida's intense sun and heat, but gardening in shade can be challenging.

Lawn grasses in particular are difficult to grow in moderate to deep shade. They typically need at least 6 hours of sun, although certain species and cultivars can adapt to less. Additionally, most vegetables and fruit crops demand extended periods of full sun to produce well.

Shade shifts daily, seasonally, and over time as trees grow. Carefully analyzing *where* and *when* shade occurs is a first step. Also, recognizing *types* of shade is important as some kinds of shade are suitable for growing plants while other types are very problematic.

For example, many shade-tolerant plants prefer the following conditions:

- Four or fewer hours of full sun, preferably morning or evening
- Dappled shade all day
- High, shifting shade (pine shade)

Examples of difficult shade include the following areas:

- Dense and dark (no sun)
- In the shadow of buildings
- Dominated by tree roots
- Very wet or dry

Sometimes difficult shade can be improved by lifting or thinning the tree canopy or large shrubs so more sun or indirect light can penetrate. Keep in mind that there are right and (very) wrong ways to prune trees. Rely on a professional, such as an ISA Certified Arborist, to do the job. See <http://www.isa-arbor.com/faca/findArborist.aspx> to find an ISA Certified Arborist.

Sometimes the best solution for difficult shade is to convert it to an outdoor garden room enhanced by seating, garden art, mulch, hardscape, colorful containers, a water feature, a birdbath, or other focal points. Leave the leaf litter that falls and allow these areas to be "self-mulching."

Generally speaking, the following types of plants are potentially good candidates for shade:

- Plants with broad leaves
- Foliage plants (houseplants) for cold-protected areas of South and Central Florida or for use as cold-tender annuals (Table 3)
- Most ferns
- Numerous tropical perennials in the Acanthaceae family (Table 2)
- Woodland native plants

Tables 1, 2, and 3 list some plants that tolerate reduced sunlight. These lists are not exhaustive.

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Every plant has cultural needs besides light. Make sure to select plants that are suited to the site (“right plant, right place”).

A few other considerations when growing plants in shade include the following:

- Areas under tree canopy tend to be warmer, frost-free spots more amenable to cold-tender plants.
- Digging among the roots of trees and shrubs is difficult, so use smaller plants that don’t need a large planting hole. Water them frequently until they’re established.
- Fertilizer cannot compensate for inadequate light. It is not a substitute for photosynthesis.
- Shaded lawns should be mowed higher and receive less fertilizer, water, and traffic. See *Growing Turfgrass in the Shade* (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep072>).
- For color in shady areas, use plants that produce light-colored flowers. Dark flowers don’t show up as well.
- The local county Extension office can verify the reliability of a plant in your county (<http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map>).

Additional Resources

Chaplin, L. T., and M. M. Brandies. 1998. *The Florida Gardener’s Book of Lists*. Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing.

Dehgan, B. 1998. *Landscape Plants for Subtropical Climates*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

UF/IFAS. 2010. *The Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Guide to Plant Selection & Landscape Design*. http://fyn.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/FYN_Plant_Selection_Guide_v090110.pdf.

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Table 1. Selected shade-tolerant plants for North (N), Central (C), and South (S) Florida

Plant	Region
Turf	
St. Augustinegrass dwarf cultivars ('Sapphire', 'Seville', 'Delmar', and 'Captiva')	NCS
Zoysiagrass cultivars (e.g., 'Empire')	NC
Centipedegrass	N
Small trees (under 30')	
Devil's walkingstick (<i>Aralia spinosa</i>)*	NC
Dahoon holly (<i>Ilex cassine</i>)*	NCS
Dogwood (<i>Cornus florida</i>)*	NC
Pond apple (<i>Annona glabra</i>)*	S
Red buckeye (<i>Aesculus pavia</i>)*	NC
Redbud (<i>Cercis canadensis</i>)*	NC
Silverbell (<i>Halesia</i> spp.)*	N
Snowbell (<i>Styrax americanus</i>)*	NCS
Sparkleberry (<i>Vaccinium arboreum</i>)*	NC
Spicewood (<i>Calyptanthus pallens</i>)*	S
Swamp dogwood (<i>Cornus foemina</i>)*	NCS
Walter's viburnum (<i>Viburnum obovatum</i>)*	NCS
Yaupon (<i>Ilex vomitoria</i>)*	NCS
Palms/cycads	
Bamboo palm (<i>Chamadorea</i> spp.)	CS
Blue-stem/dwarf palmetto (<i>Sabal minor</i>)*	NCS
Coontie (<i>Zamia floridana</i>)*	NCS
Formosa palm (<i>Arenga engleri</i>)	CS
Lady palm (<i>Rhapis excelsa</i>)	CS
Needle palm (<i>Rhapidophyllum hystrix</i>)*	NCS
Saw palmetto (<i>Serenoa repens</i>)*	NCS
Shrubs	
Arrowwood (<i>Viburnum dentatum</i>)*	NC
Azalea (<i>Rhododendron</i> cultivars)	NC
Aucuba (<i>Aucuba japonica</i>)	NC
Anise - Florida (<i>Illicium floridanum</i>)*	NCS
Anise - yellow (<i>Illicium parviflorum</i>)*	NCS
Banana shrub (<i>Magnolia figo</i>)	NC
Beautyberry (<i>Callicarpa americana</i>)*	NCS
Camellia (<i>C. japonica</i> , <i>C. sasanqua</i>)	NC
Cleyera (<i>Ternstroemia gymnanthera</i>)	NC
Crape jasmine/pinwheel jasmine (<i>Tabernaemontana divaricata</i>)	CS
Dwarf schefflera (<i>Schefflera arboricola</i>)	CS
Dwarf Walter's viburnum (<i>Viburnum obovatum</i> -dwarf cultivars)*	NCS
Fatsia (<i>Fatsia japonica</i>)	NCS
Firebush (<i>Hamelia patens</i>)*	NCS
Florida azalea (<i>Rhododendron austrinum</i>)*	N

Plant	Region
Gallberry (<i>Ilex glabra</i>)*	NCS
Gardenia (<i>Gardenia augusta</i>)	NCS
Hydrangea (<i>Hydrangea macrophylla</i>)	NC
Mahonia (<i>Mahonia fortunei</i>)	NC
Marlberry (<i>Ardisia escallonioides</i>)*	CS
Myrsine (<i>Rapanea punctata</i>)*	S
Oakleaf hydrangea (<i>Hydrangea quercifolia</i>)*	NC
Fetterbush (<i>Lyonia lucida</i>)*	NCS
Pinxter azalea (<i>Rhododendron canescens</i>)*	NC
Pipestem (<i>Agarista populifolia</i>)*	NC
Sandankwa viburnum (<i>Viburnum suspensum</i>)	NCS
Scorpion tail (<i>Heliotropium angiospermum</i>)*	NCS
Simpson's stopper (<i>Myrcianthes fragrans</i>)*	NCS
Snailseed (<i>Cocculus laurifolius</i>)	CS
Summersweet (<i>Clethra alnifolia</i>)	NC
Strawberry bush (<i>Euonymus americanus</i>)*	NC
String lily (<i>Crinum americanum</i>)*	NCS
Sweetshrub (<i>Calycanthus floridus</i>)*	NC
Tea olive (<i>Osmanthus fragrans</i>)	NC
Umbrella sedge (<i>Cyperus alternifolius</i>)	NCS
Virginia willow (<i>Itea virginica</i>)*	NC
Walter's viburnum (<i>Viburnum obovatum</i>)*	NC
Wax myrtle (<i>Myrica cerifera</i>)*	NCS
Wild coffee (<i>Psychotria nervosa</i>)*	CS
Witch hazel (<i>Hamamelis virginiana</i>)*	NC
Yesterday, today and tomorrow (<i>Brunfelsia</i> spp.)	NCS
Grasses	
River oats (<i>Chasmanthium latifolium</i>)*	NC
Tiger grass (<i>Thysanolaena latifolia</i>)	CS
Ferns	
Autumn fern (<i>Dryopteris erythrosora</i>)	NCS
Chain ferns (<i>Woodwardia</i> spp.)*	NCS
Cinnamon fern (<i>Osmunda cinnamomea</i>)*	NCS
Hart's tongue fern (<i>Asplenium scolopendrium</i>)	NC
Holly fern (<i>Cyrtomium falcatum</i>)	NCS
Japanese painted fern (<i>Athyrium niponicum</i> 'Pictum')	N
Leather fern (<i>Acrostichum danaeifolium</i>)	CS
Leatherleaf fern (<i>Rumohra adiantiformis</i>)	CS
Southern shield fern (<i>Thelypteris kunthii</i>)*	NCS
Royal fern (<i>Osmunda regalis</i>)*	NCS
Southern woods fern (<i>Dryopteris normalis</i>)*	NCS
Sword ferns (<i>Nephrolepis biserrata</i> and <i>N. exaltata</i>)*	CS
Swamp fern (<i>Blechnum serrulatum</i>)*	NCS
Silver-leaf brake fern (<i>Pteris ensiformis</i> 'Victoriae')	CS
Virginia chain fern (<i>Woodwardia virginica</i>)*	NCS

Plant	Region
Groundcovers	
African hosta (<i>Drimiopsis maculata</i>)	NCS
Algerian ivy (<i>Hedera canariensis</i>)	CS
Artillery fern (<i>Pilea microphylla</i>)	CS
Asiatic jasmine (<i>Trachelospermum asiaticum</i>)	NCS
Aztec grass (<i>Ophiopogon intermedius</i>)	NCS
Lilyturf (<i>Liriope</i> spp.)	NCS
Carpet bugleweed (<i>Ajuga reptans</i>)	N
Cast iron plant (<i>Aspidistra elatior</i>)	NCS
Creeping yew (<i>Cephalotaxus harringtonia</i> 'Prostrata')	CS
Florida violets (<i>Viola</i> spp.)	NCS
Mondo grass (<i>Ophiopogon japonicus</i>)	NCS
Periwinkle (<i>Vinca minor</i>)	CS
Spider plant (<i>Chlorophytum comosum</i>)	CS
Strawberry begonia (<i>Saxifraga stolonifera</i>)	NCS
Swedish ivy (<i>Plectranthus verticillatus</i>)	CS
Turtle vine/Bolivian Jew (<i>Callisia repens</i>)	CS
* Native Florida plant	

Table 2. Colorful annuals and perennials

Common name	Scientific name
Begonias	<i>Begonia</i> spp.
Bromeliads	<i>Aechmea</i> , <i>Bilbergia</i> , and <i>Neoregelia</i> spp.
Blood lily	<i>Haemanthus multiflorus</i>
Blue ginger	<i>Dichorisandra thyrsiflora</i>
Blue sage	<i>Eranthemum pulchellum</i>
Butterfly gingers	<i>Hedychium</i> spp.
Caladium	<i>Caladium</i> x <i>hortulanum</i>
Charmed wine	<i>Oxalis</i> 'Charmed Wine'
Coleus	<i>Solenostemon scutellarioides</i>
Crossandra	<i>Crossandra infundibuliformis</i>
Firespike	<i>Odontonema strictum</i>
Dancing girl ginger	<i>Globba bulbifera</i>
Ground orchid	<i>Spathoglottis</i> spp.
Hostas	<i>Hosta</i> hybrids, such as 'Sunhosta', 'Royal Standard', 'Elegans', 'Patriot', and 'Frances Williams'
Impatiens	<i>Impatiens</i> spp.
Jacobinia	<i>Justicia carnea</i>
Jewels of Opar	<i>Talinum paniculatum</i> 'Variegata'
Kaffir lily	<i>Clivia miniata</i>
Leopard plant	<i>Farfugium japonicum</i>
Nun's orchid	<i>Phaius tankervilliae</i>
Ornamental sweet potato	<i>Ipomoea batatas</i>
Peacock gingers	<i>Kaempferia</i> spp.

Common name	Scientific name
Persian shield	<i>Strobilanthes dyerianus</i>
Polka dot plant	<i>Hypoestes phyllostachya</i>
Red flame ivy	<i>Hemigraphis alternata</i>
Sanchezia	<i>Sanchezia nobilis</i>
Shell ginger	<i>Alpinia zerumbet</i>
Toad lilies	<i>Tricyrtis</i> spp.
Walking irises	<i>Neomarica</i> spp.
Wishbone flower	<i>Torenia fournieri</i>
Yellow shrimp plant	<i>Pachystachys lutea</i>

Table 3. Assorted foliage plants (houseplants) for South Florida and cold-protected areas of Central Florida

Common name	Scientific name
Chinese evergreen	<i>Aglaonema</i> spp.
Amazon lily	<i>Eucharis amazonica</i>
Anthurium	<i>Anthurium</i> spp.
Aralia	<i>Polyscias</i> spp.
Calathea	<i>Calathea</i> spp.
Ti plant	<i>Cordyline</i> spp.
Dumbcane	<i>Dieffenbachia</i> spp.
Dracaena	<i>Dracaena</i> spp.
False aralia	<i>Dizygotheca elegantissima</i>
Prayer plant	<i>Maranta</i> spp.
Peace lily	<i>Spathiphyllum</i> spp.
Philodendron	<i>Philodendron</i> spp. and hybrids
Snake plant	<i>Sansevieria</i>
Triostar	<i>Stromanthe sanguinea</i> 'Triostar'
ZZ plant	<i>Zamioculcas zamiifolia</i>