

SMALL GARDENS AND SHADE

Bob Brown

As gardens get smaller they get shadier. All those walls and fences tend to reduce light levels – maybe imperceptibly so that although the normal run of plants will not die immediately, they'll not thrive either taking, perhaps, five years to die. Filling your garden by trial and error will be a long, frustrating and expensive process. Or maybe you have a large garden but it's on the north side of your house, or maybe there's a large sycamore next door half of whose canopy covers half of your garden so that even if you have a large garden much of it is shady. Shade is not a problem. It's an opportunity.

Lower light levels make gardens less busy and more restful. Shady gardens are more sheltered – warmer when it's cool and cooler when it's warm. Enclosure captures and keeps perfumes better too. Such restful, sheltered scented and comfortable gardens cry out to be used so install seating and put in uplighters. Sit outside in the evenings as well as during the day. Go out in fur hats with cocoa in the winter.

Capitalise on the restful qualities of shady gardens by designing generous spaces, deep borders and plant boldly – reckon on metre squares of planting for a small or average garden which means one small shrub or fifteen bulbs in a block. Fussy planting is never restful (although it can be colourful) and if you have a small garden it can look ridiculous. I have a customer with a minute shady garden with perhaps 15 enormous plants in it and it looks fabulous. I know of many gardens where small scale planting merely draws attention to the walls and fences.

What to plant? It's trite but true. Pale or white flowers look really good in shade. If you are into bedding use white busy lizzies or white begonias. As shrubs, hydrangeas are good and forms of *H. paniculata* like 'Phantom' or *H. arborescens* 'Annabelle' work really well. During the winter use the best modern Hellebores. I've chosen *Helleborus* 'Winter Moonbeam' because it has the best summer foliage meaning I can enjoy it all year. The white flowers look outwards and mature pink. Both white and pink colours work well in shade.

You'll need some colour as well. Phlox are usually grown in sunny borders but they'd much prefer your shady ones and of course they provide both colour and perfume. I'd avoid the purples and blues because they are less visible in shade and plump for pinks. There are dozens all making worthy garden plants. I also have a clump of what are generally called "tree lilies" – a pink one - *Lilium* 'Robina' which also scents the air. I spray it with systemic insecticide soon after it appears and I see the first lily beetle. Thereafter they're no trouble.

Rooty areas under trees are good places to plant hardy cyclamen and with care you can organise continuous flowers. Start with *C. hederifolium* in late July followed by *C. coum* in January, *C. repandum* in April and *C. purpureum* in June and there are well-patterned deep green leaves at times too. Such areas need height as well and this could be provided by *Choisya ternata* or better still my favourite shrub *C. 'White Dazzler'*, or *Danae racemosa* with its shimmering foliage. *Kirengeshoma koreana* opens its pendent waxy primrose-yellow flowers in late August and September. Although the yellow isn't in the least brassy it's confined to a splendid area I dub "The Yellow Patch" which brings sun into the shade especially in winter.

In shade, flowers are inevitably going to be less important, not absent - but less important. The flip side of this is that foliage will become more important. Use it well, vary the textures, sizes, colours and shapes. Mix in pale colours to lighten the shade but the use of silver or grey foliage doesn't work. In nature silvers and greys are defence against too much light and not only would they fail in a shady garden, they wouldn't look right either. On the other hand the variegated foliage in say *Euonymus fortunei* can be key. Use cold whites like 'Emerald Gaiety' and 'Silver Queen' or simply 'Variegatus' which is a warmer golden yellow. Try non-climbing tree ivies like *Hedera* 'Cavendishii Latina' too but don't use any ivy where the leaves go green in shadow. If the shade is very dark and the conditions dry, *Fatsia japonica* 'Spider Web' will diminish the gloom especially in late November and December when its ghostly white flowers bloom on white stems. If it develops hints of yellow you are growing it in too light a place. Finally there's a wonderful pale fern that will contrast well with anything around it with distinctive shape and colour *Athyrium otophorum* var. *okanum*.

I use fuchsias for foliage as well as flowers – carefully because the yellow-leaved 'Genii' goes green in shade (as do many yellow-leaved cultivars of many kinds of plant) whereas *Fuchsia* 'Tom West' which is white and pink variegated keeps its leaf colour as well as flowering red. The supreme yellow-leaved shade-lover that does not green-up is *Dicentra spectabilis* (*Lamprocapnos spectabilis*) 'Gold Heart' which has pink-red flowers in spring as well.

Begonias will provide foliage colours too and they adore shade. Plant them in blocks and avoid prissy edgings and repetition. Some are even hardy like 'Beni Tochiba' with its pink and silver leaves. Heucheras seem to cope with moderate shade well and can provide wonderful colour. I enjoy the khaki-brown of 'Bronze Beauty' next to the *Athyrium* above, and the almost impossible pink of 'Berry Smoothie' and I have a large old plant of 'Pistache' which has moved up in pot sizes but never made it into the ground. I move the pot around to lighten the shadier parts of the garden. It's particularly effective in winter.

Vary the foliage textures. Avoid fuzzy. Fuzzy is another defence against high light levels, isn't natural to shade and it wouldn't look right but you can use a little grassy texture. Grasses tend to avoid shade too but there are some splendid exceptions. Wood millet (*Melica uniflora*) is a British native of dry woodland. In gardens the neat white-flowered form *M. uniflora* f. *albida* gets to about 25cm high, sparkles in spring and persists, still looking good until the winter. The variegated form is all white and pink. Don't cut them, these are ornamental grasses! *Camellia* textures are the opposite of fuzzy. I grow 'Lovelight'. The relatively large dark green leaves are incredibly glossy and reflect light and movement in a very dark space. Keep them in scale by cutting them back after flowering and limit yourself to one or two because their foliage is very dominant. If you garden in alkaline conditions grow one in acid compost in a big pot.

Use big foliage - it will complement the bold planting. Many shade tolerant or shade-loving plants naturally have big foliage. Bergénias are good (so much better than all those scruffy ones of my youth). If you want traditional shiny-leaved varieties I'd plump for the biggest – 'Ballawley', 'XXL' or 'Bartók' but you also need to know that the species *Bergenia ciliata* whose leaves are covered in a pile of soft hairs has some very large-leaved forms like 'Wilton'. Hydrangeas are usually fairly large-

leaved but if you want a giant choose *Hydrangea aspera subsp.sargentiana* whose felted leaves can reach 30cm wide.

You can use shape like you might use a sculpture. A larger grass like *Hystrix patula* would look good isolated from similar shapes. Or you can install some weirdly shaped plants like arisaemas or podophyllums to draw the eye. I have an enormous plant of *Podophyllum* 'Spotty Dotty' 55cm high and a metre across. It delights with its large handsomely patterned polygonal peltate foliage and clusters of large maroon flowers. Ferns too can make fabulously shaped plants like *Matteucia struthiopteris* with its giant green shuttlecocks or some of the best forms of hart's tongue fern like *Asplenium scolopendrium* 'Crispum'. Aspidistras and clivias need seriously dark places. They both have shapely form (and the clivias good flowers too) although the clivias need really sheltered gardens. The foliage of *Arum italicum* 'Marmoratum' is well-patterned and arrow-shaped. It comes up in autumn, furnishes the garden in winter and dies down at the end of the spring.

Walls and fences need softening with climbers. Softening doesn't mean obscuring or covering – a bit of an exposed plane surface is a useful adjunct to any garden providing contrast and helping to frame it. Many climbers are light loving and climb to reach the light then flower out of sight. Avoid them. *Schizophrama hydrangeoides* 'Moonlight' has grey and green foliage and amazingly perfumed white bracted flowers from ground to the top. Related *Pileostegia viburnoides* is a self-clinging evergreen climber for north walls with scented cream flowers. *Akebia quinata* has scented purple-pink flowers and evergreen palmate lobed foliage and is very good in shade. Most clematis and honeysuckles cope with shade very well too. I like the *Clematis viticella* cultivars like 'Alba Luxurians' and the immensely vigorous and long-flowering honeysuckle *Lonicera similis var.delavayi*.

The grass is always greener over the septic tank. I know many people who have created shade because they had none and others who wantonly remove trees instead of living with them. Take a deep breath and swim with the tide. If it's shade you've got, feel blessed and use it to create an amazing garden you can really enjoy.