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MICHIGAN GARDENING



MICHIGAN'S OWN GUIDE TO GREAT GARDENING & LANDSCAPING MAGAZINE

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'Wonderblue' common lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*), sometimes called 'Little Boy Blue', is resistant to mildew disease. Featured on page 28. Photo courtesy of Laura Jull.

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Photo courtesy of Susan Martin

CONQUER the Shade with INVENTIVE CONTAINER COMBINATIONS

Story by Susan Martin

Some of the nicest things about living in Michigan are the majestic oaks, maples, beeches and pines that line our neighborhood streets, shading us in the hot summer, creating fabulous fall color and enhancing a landscape's overall beauty. As a result, our decks, patios and porches are often shaded for at least part of the day. Although this may make for pleasant lounging, it presents a bit of a challenge for growing plants.

Since purchasing my home on a wooded lot six years ago, I've had to learn what shade really means. I continually push the limits to figure out what will thrive in my gardens and containers, despite the lack of direct sunlight. If you're willing to be a little adventurous, you, too, will be amazed at the fabulous things you can grow in shade.

FORGET 'SUPPOSED TO'

Have you noticed that many of the most common annuals for containers—petunias, geraniums (*Pelargonium* spp.) and verbena—all thrive in sun but struggle in shade? What are those of us who garden in shade to do? We want colorful containers, too!

The first thing you'll need to do when designing your shade containers is to abandon your notion of what you are "supposed to" plant in containers. Annuals, tropicals, perennials, shrubs, bulbs—any and all of these can work magic in containers. They're all plants, so don't be afraid to mix them up!

Forget what you think you know.



Photo courtesy of Susan Martin

HOW DEEP IS YOUR SHADE?

Next, you'll need to assess what kind of shade you're dealing with. Does the sun shine directly on your porch in the morning or afternoon? Do you have tall trees that provide open or dappled shade on your patio all day? You'll have lots of choices of plants to use in both of those situations.

If you're dealing with a dark space that never sees the light of day, you may want to choose someplace else to put your containers or understand that your choices will be more limited there.

Take a clue from nature, where under story plants, which are naturally adapted to grow in shade, typically have larger leaves. Tropicals, such as elephant ear (*Colocasia gigantea*), *Canna* and *Begonia* thrive in shade and are useful for adding tropical flair to containers.

To create a focal point on your patio, choose a large container (24 inches or larger) and plant a tall tropical, such as elephant ears in the center. Then surround it with colorful complementary plants, such as coleus (*Solenostemon*

FIRST PAGE

The artfully painted leaves of rex begonias (*B. rex-cultorum*) offer tremendous opportunities for color echoing in plants, such as the magenta flowering *Streptocarpus*, complemented by the softly trailing foliage of *Dichondra argentea* 'Silver Falls'.

LEFT TOP

This large pot of elephant ears (*Colocasia* spp.) is the focal point in this patio display, which contains a broad spectrum of shade plants, including rex begonias dragon tree (*Dracaena marginata*), coleus (*Solenostemon scutellarioides*), *Hosta* and *Caladium*.



Photo courtesy of Susan Martin

LEFT BOTTOM

The red banana tree (*Musa acuminata* 'Bebrina' syn. 'Rojo') in the center of this colorful, cohesive collection pulls together the green, purple, and orange tones echoed in the individual pots of coleus, sweetpotato vine (*Ipomoea batatas*) and *Cordyline* that surround it.

How deep is your shade?

CONQUER the Shade with INVENTIVE CONTAINER COMBINATIONS

spp.), wishbone flower (*Torenia fournier*) and grape ivy (*Cissus rhombifolia* syn. *alata*). All of these plants will flourish in average to moist soil and partial to open shade.

Think outside the box and try shopping in the houseplant section of your local greenhouse for shade plants. Most will thrive in your shade containers outdoors and if you so desire, you can bring them back in the house in the fall. Some of my favorites that grow in any amount of shade include *Streptocarpus*, bird's nest fern (*Asplenium nidus*), wandering Jew (*Tradescantia zebrina*) and Boston fern (*Nephrolepis exaltata*).

Hardy perennials can be fantastic in containers, especially when combined with annuals or tropicals. Coral bells (*Heuchera* spp.), Japanese sedge (*Carex hachijoensis*) and foamy bells (*Heucherella tiarelloides*) are easily complemented by begonias, ornamental spikes (*Dracaena indivisa*) and others that grow well in drier soils. As an added bonus, you can plant the perennials in your garden in the fall and enjoy them again next year.

CONTAINER SELECTION

No matter which plants you choose, be sure to use containers that have at least one drainage hole in the bottom. Moisture-conserving potting soil is not necessary for shade containers because the soil naturally



Photo courtesy of Susan Martin.



Photo courtesy of Susan Martin.

← Collectible miniature hostas are best showcased in shallow troughs, such as this rustic stone vessel. If planted in the ground, the miniatures may go unnoticed.

↑ The stems of wandering Jew (*Tradescantia zebrina*) weave their way artfully through the widely arching fronds of bird's nest fern (*Asplenium nidus*) in this inventive container. Smaller pots of *Impatiens*, wishbone flower (*Torenia fournier*) and coleus anchor the taller plant stand in this space.

↗ Forget conventional labels and try combining tropicals and perennials to create one dynamic shade container. Here, the rich colors of *Canna Tropicanna*[™] (*Canna* 'Phaison') are echoed in the foliage of 'Peach Flambé' coral bells (*Heuchera* 'Peach Flambé') and contrasted by the purple flowers of blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium* spp.).



Photo courtesy of Terra Nova Nurseries

stays moist for longer without the sun to dry it out. Heavy soils that retain moisture will quickly encourage plants to rot in shade containers.

Container color is an important design factor. To add some pizzazz to your patio pots, choose containers in colors that contrast with the plants, such as planting orange begonias in a bright blue pot, for example. If you prefer complementary colors, select a container color that more closely matches the flowers in it.

Tall, vase or urn-shaped containers are perfect for larger tropicals, while short containers are best for compact plants. Use a variety of container sizes when grouping several pots together in a single cohesive display.

Get Ideas

For loads more container ideas and trends, go online to sites like Pinterest and look for creative container gardening books.

Susan Martin is a lifelong gardener and the director of marketing for Walters Gardens in Zeeland.

Great color!

Need this!

Lucas, age 3

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