

Designs for a Shady Garden Floor

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In the shady areas of our gardens the luminous orange-red *Scadoxus* blooms have died off leaving the Bell Clivia, *C. miniata* to carry on the vibrant display. Once those flowers fade and the plants recede once again into the monotonously green backdrop, what then? It is the months between the orange-flowering bulbs and the mauve and pink *Plectranthus* displays in autumn, that frustrate gardeners, for the average shade bed is notoriously bland. The most common lament is lack of colour and a struggle to get anything to survive for long. Dictionary synonyms like 'soft', 'calm', 'balmy', 'soothing' certainly help to make 'bland' a little more attractive, but, I'll admit, 'insipid', 'wishy-washy' and 'drab' are there too. So, how do we brighten up the shade garden floor?

Well, why not design this area by taking flower colour out of the equation, for an attractive shade display that is striking and exciting is not only about colour. Woodland and forest edges are species-rich habitats filled with short-interest plants that add pace and dynamism to an arrangement. Use texture and form and a mix of plant types to provide interesting detail through the year; then add your seasonal colour bursts. Before you even get to the plants, though, you need to know the light levels and soil conditions of your shade; these are the conditions that govern whether your plants merely eke out an existence before succumbing, or thrive long-term.

The degrees of 'brightness' vary significantly, and each species has specific light level needs, and require it in combination with either damp or dry soil. [Click here for a recap.](#)

Plants tolerant to shady or low-light conditions have adapted to do two things: make the best use of available energy, and conserve energy. So, plants don't waste time producing the sun protection features like waxy leaves or compounds that absorb extra solar energy to prevent burning, and flower colour is usually muted. Leaves are usually dark green, large and thin to absorb as much light as possible for photosynthesis, with little surface protection which is why full-shade species bleach or burn when hit by sunlight. Often, as with *Plectranthus* species, the undersides of leaves are coloured maroon and purple that captures the light that does pass through, reflect it back up onto the leaf. Some species, like the *Ledebouria* bulbs, have mottled leaves, a form of camouflage, often as a defence mechanism against browsing by animals. These blotches tend to fade in dark shade.

Chocolate drops in a swirl of mint

The *Ledebouria* species are beautiful shade-loving bulbs, chocolate drops in a swirl of mint; fresh and bright despite the absence of orange.

Ledebouria petiolata – Leopard Lily, Little White Soldiers, injobo. Known for years as *Drimiopsis maculata*, this small bulb is hardy, tolerant of neglect, and easy to grow. Bulbs are deciduous in colder areas, a drawback for some gardeners, but, imagine the excitement of discovering the first green sprig of the new season. The common name of Leopard Lily references the striking bright to dark green leaves spotted with dark green to purple-brown blotches. Spots are more pronounced in brighter light, and these can fade as leaves become a darker green in deeper shade. Plants flower from late winter to early autumn, 30 cm high white flowers in tight clusters. This little bulb thrives in full, light to partial shade; it will take some morning sun if not too hot or for too long. Watch for signs of leaf burn in these light conditions. Plant the bulb with the neck at or just above soil level. *L. petiolata* copes with light frost. Insects, including the honey bee, pollinate the flowers.

Ledebouria species: Probably *L. maxima* (= *Resnova maxima*; = *Drimiopsis maxima*)

This 40 cm high bulbous plant grows in shady areas in grassland often amongst rocks in the Eastern Cape and KZN. Small flowers on elongated stems twist their way around the leaves from September to December; colouring is somewhat unusual, a light grey with narrow pink, white, green or brown stripes.

Add the bright green, strappy leaves of *Chlorophytum* species, like *C. bowkeri* that produces slender 1 m high stems with pure white star-like flowers that close at night. They flower from November or December through to February. This species prefers moist shade, its natural habitat being damp and rocky grasslands and forest margins. Or try *C. krookianum*, similar to the former, but taller.

The variegated *Plectranthus madagascariensis* is a pretty variegated groundcover for shade. A fast-spreading groundcover with pale green leaves edged with cream and covered in small white flowers from March to May. Pretty as they are, gardeners mostly plant it for the foliage. It can cope with periods of sun but does create a more lush and moist looking cover in light shade.

Feathery Fronds

Asparagus virgatus: The Broom Asparagus is a slender evergreen perennial that grows 1 m high, so ethereal that it is unseen for much of the year until the lightest of snowflake-flowers highlight its delicate beauty in spring. Tall, bare stems support wispy heads of

emerald green leaves so soft they're used by some bird species to line their nests. Small green berries follow, ripening to orange, eaten and dispersed by birds. The Broom Asparagus adds mid-height texture to a shady design, versatile enough to grow in damp or dry soils and light to semi-shade. Plants are frost hardy.

Asparagus densiflorus 'Meyersii', Emerald Fern or Cat's Tail Fern: This versatile fern adds lovely groundcover shape and texture in light or dappled shade, as well as areas that receive either morning or afternoon sun. In summer the compact fronds are covered in tiny white flowers hidden among the leaves; these are short-lived (about two weeks) and are followed by bright red seeds that attract birds.

Giant Forest Fern, *Nephrolepis biserrata*, has large, arching fronds that add a lush, tropical feel. It prefers damp soils and clumps thin out as the soils dry out. *N. biserrata* occurs in small areas of KZN and Mpumalanga in thickets, on forest margins and in clearings. Try the *Polystichum* species, the Shield Ferns, in frosty gardens, many of which grow in the mountainous areas.

Cyperus albostriatus: a half-hardy grass-like groundcover for dark, dappled or semi-shade, and average to damp soils, though seems to adapt quite happily to dry conditions. 40 cm high, the soft grassy heads grow horizontally and in summer produce a froth of creamy-green flowers. Plants roots spread underground so in small gardens it may be wise to contain them in pots set amongst the ground-dwelling plants. An excellent choice for wet soils.

The Spreading Spike Moss, *Selaginella kraussiana*, is a prostrate groundcover for damp soils in light to dark shade; gardens experiencing light to moderate frosts can choose one of the low growing creeping shade crassulas instead, like *Crassula spathulata*; this species forms a dense mat of succulent leaves with tiny star-like pink flowers in spring and summer. Mix it with the everyday cream and green striped Hen and Chicken; variegated leaves lighten the mid to dark green hues, and they are moderately frost hardy and water wise.

Shade-loving species thrive in the leaf mulch of woodland and forest, so retain the fallen leaves of the trees and shrubs that provide the shade, and your plants will reward you with lush growth. The adaptations shade plants make to survive here limit the number of plants that provide the orange, red and yellow flowers so prevalent in the full sun sections. But, knowing your shade conditions and working with plants that suit them will help you design a shade garden the antonym of 'bland'; zingy!