

Shade in the Summer Garden

Shade is such a valuable element in any garden in summer. It allows us to enjoy outdoor living even on hot days and protects some of our plants from drying heat. This month I am reflecting on how to make the most of shade in the garden and how to utilise summer observations to help you plan for shade.

Shade can be from trees, shrubs, buildings, garden structures, umbrellas and even from low plants which shade the soil. Summer is the very best time to look at where existing shade is in your garden at different times of the day and to think about how to utilise it. Shade helps to cool the temperature of the garden. It can provide us with enticing places to enjoy on summer days.

Recently I started planning and planting a new garden which has a large eucalypt growing in a sloped lawn, about 16 metres from the house. This tree provides a wide sweep of summer shade, which moves from the west side of the tree in the morning to the east side of the tree in the afternoon. In my initial vision, I saw a small table and two chairs close to the trunk of the tree. By looking at where the shade actually fell over the length of a day, and particularly at mealtimes, I realised that I had a much broader choice of where to place my furniture. I started to think on a larger scale and decided to create a wide level terrace with the tree as the focal point, echoing the shade pattern to some extent and defining the area as somewhere special. The drop at the edge of the terrace is only about 60 cm and will be a sloped garden a metre or so wide. The garden is far enough away from the tree for plants to receive light and it acts like a raised bed above the level of the tree roots.

Sitting on the terrace and observing it from the areas around is helping me to work out how this space relates to the rest of the garden. I need some height to define the edge, maybe some stumps to sit on or a little hedge, also some rustic steps, tough plants that mostly flower in summer and furniture that I can move around. I have gone from a table under a tree to a cool and lovely summer room big enough for a family banquet!



Not every shady spot needs to be on such a grand scale – a bench tucked in under the apricot tree is a summer haven in our nursery. Undercutting a large shrub can create a living pergola – just the spot for a single chair and a little statue. A friend has used shade cloth to create a fernery between the east side of her house and the tall paling fence – a cool and private place where she relaxes with a book on a banana lounge. She talks of adding a water feature – water trickling down to a basin below or some such. She seeks out shade loving plants and keeps the water up to them – possible in this small and treasured area but impossible in the garden at large.

Some deciduous plants are particularly valuable for providing summer shade in our area. Losing their leaves means that they enable us to have winter sun as well. Fruiting and ornamental grapes grow quickly and cover a framework in two or three years. Most also provide stunning autumn displays. Small trees, such as crab apples and crepe myrtles, suit smaller spots while trees such as ornamental pears, maples, some oaks and the Chinese pistachio can create wonderful dense shade for larger areas.

Fruit trees can double as shade trees – select an early fruiting variety so that you can enjoy the crop and then take the net off to use the shade. If you are not too stressed about sharing with the birds, try a Nashi Pear for the lovely copper new leaves, large white flowers, fruit and autumn display.

Shading the ground with shrubs and ground covers which act as living mulch is a good water conservation technique. So also is utilising arid area and drought tolerant plants to create shade protection from the harsh afternoon western sun. Observing which plants tolerate hot conditions and which ones look stressed, as well as where your summer shade lines fall, may inspire you to change your garden a little. It will help you to understand why ‘nothing grows there’ or why a plant that grows well in one spot in your garden can’t cope in another. Arm yourself with information, give the sun loving plants full sun and coddle the others with some afternoon or all day shade in summer.

It is fun to plan your own shady oasis to suit you and the people and pets that share your garden. Consider it a wonderful yet practical indulgence and look for little touches that will make you smile when you go there – a wind chime, a hanging basket, a pot of pansies, a clay mould of your child’s hand. Without a doubt, hot weather is definitely the time to think of and plan for shade.

Visit our nursery at 77 Dundas St, Inverleigh, 3321, corner of McCallum Rd and Dundas St (Winchelsea Rd), www.gardengatenursery.com.au

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