

## Planting under Trees

Planting flower beds under trees is a great way to keep your large shade tree healthy and happy. Leaves accumulate, and for the best health of the trees that root zone area really benefits from the leaves and it's best to not remove them. These falling leaves are a natural source of fertilizer as they break down and work into the soil, improving its structure and keeping the tree healthy and moist during dry periods. Rather than fighting this manna from the sky why not use it to mulch an under-planting of beautiful flowers and texture plants.



When determining where to place an bed look for areas that have a lot of leaf litter, these are the natural places to create an under-planting. Often several trees will grow together and create one large bed

A good pulled-together under-planting look comes from choosing plants that are the right size, and like the condition of shade your tree offers. If you're planting under tall older trees a good mix of shrubs, perennials, and annuals in the four foot and smaller range is a good choice. Medium to small size trees (mature height 15 to 20 ft) look best with under-plantings in the 3 foot and smaller range. Truly small trees that will

never reach taller than 10 ft. are best planted with low ground covers and shrubs that won't grow larger than 1 foot in height.

When considering what plants to place under trees, take into



consideration the degree of shade your tree is creating, as well as the amount of competition the roots will give your planting. Some trees like magnolia, cedar and evergreen oaks cast very dense shade, making it hard for many plants to survive. There are a range of plants

that like this type of condition; try azaleas, camellias, mondo grass, and cast iron. Maples and elms have dense root systems that a lot of plants have trouble competing with; bulbs, running ground covers like Australian woods violets, and vinca are good choices here. Some tree with very large leaves, like sycamore and mulberry, cast a deep shade and can deflect rain causing a dry area under the canopy. Plantings under these require additional watering, and plants that like deep shade, such as cast iron, non-seeding nandinia, and hydrangeas. Pine trees are easy to plant under as they cast a light shade and have a wide range of plants that grow well under them.

When planting under older established trees it's best to limit disturbing the soil. Avoid roto-tilling, carefully dig holes sized to the plants you're setting, add a little compost around the root, and mulch with a good top dressing of compost and mulch.

For a good pulled together look pick a simple pallet of a few plants that work together, plant them in mass, in sweeps and drifts, repeating the combinations throughout the bed. Layer your plantings so that the tallest plants are closest to the trunks, and arrange the smaller plants toward the edges of the tree canopy. It doesn't take a big budget to landscape a large area if you rely on spreading ground covers and bulbs; get a few started, and plan to divide up the road.



Texture is key to the under-planting look.

Often in the shade beds, where there is not enough light for

flowering plants, it's the variegated plants, and shades of green, that lighten the area and give it a good look. For texture, choose your plants by pairing ones with large leaves with ones with small leaves, or ones with light green leaves next to dark green leaves. These are the tricks to getting an exciting look in a shady nook.

So next time the autumn leaves start falling, scratch the back breaking chore of raking off your to-do list. You can rest assured that you won't have to rake, and that your flower-beds are well mulched, and your trees well fed and happy.