

## Shade Gardening in South Texas – Part 1 of 2

Shade is a precious commodity in the Rio Grande Valley. Since many of the areas that were originally covered with native trees were cleared for farmland in the past 50 to 70 years, new homes are built on treeless lots. But once trees grow and provide cooling shade, gardeners are faced with a new challenge; gardening with shade. Many of the plants which grow and provide bright color in sunny areas either stop blooming or die when the area becomes shady.

Although many gardeners feel that shady areas limit them to growing only green foliage plants such as ferns, and ivy there is a whole spectrum of exciting possibilities for adding color to a shady region in your garden. Here in the Valley many of the plants from cooler more northern climates actually need some shade to do well during the long hot period in the Valley. Some of the best blooming plants for growing in shady areas generally available at your local nursery are: ageratum, caladium, coleus, gerbera daisy, impatiens and lobelia. This article and the next Sunday's article will discuss these colorful shade loving plants.

**Ageratum.** A native of Central and Southern Mexico, ageratum is a shade loving plant that provides masses of cooling blue color while tolerating a fair amount of heat and drought. New, compact varieties usually grow to be 6 inches tall, and this plant is rapidly becoming one of the most popular annuals in America. The attractive, woolly puff-ball like flowers of the ageratum completely cover the plant all summer long, and are especially nice if you plant with a contrasting bright yellow plant mix like marigolds. Like marigolds, you need to use a systemic insecticide when planting ageratum, and reapply it monthly, to protect them from those nasty spider mites. See your Certified Texas Nursery Professional for miticide recommendation and application.

**Caladium.** Although the fancy leafed caladium does produce an insignificant flower, it's grown for beautiful, lush, arrow-shaped leaves. There are countless variations of colors and patterns making caladium perfect companions to ferns, impatiens, monkey grass, ivy, begonias or as a mixture of caladium. Caladium grow about a foot tall, with graceful, almost translucent leaves which can get to be a foot wide, colored in bands and splashes of red, rose, pink, white, silver and bronze. Caladium require shade, warm temperatures, and a rich, moist soil, containing manure or a lot of organic matter. Under these conditions they will yield big beautiful leaves.

When planting caladium tubers remove the biggest "eye" or bud on the tuber. With a sharp knife tip cut out a cone-shaped section around this eye, about 1/4 inch deep. This will force the smaller eye to grow and thus produce a fuller, more lush clump of leaves. Caladium should be planted only after the temperatures are reliably over 72 degrees F at night, since they need warm soil to sprout and grow. Plant the tubers 1 to 2 inches deep, and water them well. It doesn't matter if they are right -side-up or not, as they will grow just fine either way. In about two to four weeks, depending on soil temperatures, you will have wonderful caladium leaves coloring your shady area. As the caladium grows, keep well watered but not soggy, and give occasional applications of well

composted manure (their favorite food) available at your local nursery. Keep the blooms pinched off to encourage bushier plants. When cool weather arrives, cut off all the leaves and stems from the tubers, dig and store in a cool dry place, then next year set them out again when the weather warms up, for a delightful cascade of cooling color in your shade garden.

**Coleus.** Coleus is a hybrid plant native to Java and the Philippines that offers an astounding diversity of different colors and shapes on their brightly-colored foliage. Coleus is actually a perennial (meaning it grows and flowers year after year) but since it can be damaged by the lightest of frosts, it is best to grow it as a summer annual. The leaves of this shade-loving plant may be velvety or crinkled, deeply-notched or round and full. They can be a wonderful array of colors, both singly and in combinations, of red, magenta, orange, yellow, maroon, purple, brown, chartreuse, and green. Coleus can be grown from seeds or cuttings, but it is fasted and easiest to start them as small transplants from the nursery.

Select an area in your shade garden with either light to deep shade; but keep in mind that the leaf colors will be at their best in a cool, well-shaded area. Prior to planting work in to the soil plenty of peat moss and manure, and be sure that the drainage is good. Coleus should be planted from 6 to 18 inches apart, and will grow anywhere from 6 to 36 inches tall, depending on the variety. Occasionally pinch back your plants to keep them from getting leggy. The newer varieties may not need to be pinched back. However, be sure to keep the small lavender flower spikes pinched out to preserve the plants energy to grow new leaves. To encourage foliage production feed these plants regularly with a high-nitrogen fertilizer. Growing coleus in beds, hanging baskets, planter boxes alone or with ferns, impatiens or begonias, the bright array of coleus leaves will be delightful all summer long.

(Information source: Cecile Waugh of Waugh's Nursery, McAllen, TX)  
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