

Late Summer Color in the Shade

by Cindy Gilberg

Many gardeners lament the midsummer lull in their shade gardens. Although there are numerous plants with attractive foliage, flowers are what we want. Glorious blooms of spring and early summer are now just a memory - what now? There are many Missouri native plants that flower later, providing a hardy, reliable palette of plants for July through September.

The ideal shade garden (hopefully this is your garden!) has light shade cast by widely spaced trees with a high canopy. This quality of light allows the widest assortment of plants for shade gardens. As always, soil type is the first consideration – is it dry or wet? Rocky or rich in organic matter? The plants discussed here grow best in dry to average soil with average humus content. Adding a thin layer of leaf compost once a year will help maintain an adequate level of organic matter.

Are delphiniums in Missouri just a dream? No! Nothing is quite as dramatic as the tall, cobalt blue spires of tall larkspur (*Delphinium exaltatum*), once rare but now becoming more available to gardeners. Most populations occur in average to rocky woodlands in Missouri near the Jack's Fork and Current River in Shannon Co. It blooms at a height of 3 – 5 feet in July and August. This native species is quite hardy as long as the soil is dry. Another wonderful woodland species from average to rocky soils of the Ozarks is black cohosh (*Actea racemosa*). Previously named *Cimicifuga*, its 5' white spires stand tall, resembling exclamation points above the surrounding foliage. These two, the larkspur and the cohosh, punctuate the shade garden in a way that few other shade perennials do.



A great companion planting for these floral spikes is *Phlox paniculata*. Its flowers are structurally different, having full round heads of soft pink blooms. In late July through August the flowers sway in the breeze, adding a gentle fragrance that is always welcome. Hummingbirds and butterflies alike come to forage for nectar in the tubular flowers of phlox.

On an August walk at Shaw Nature Reserve I came across skullcap (*Scutellaria incana*) in bloom with purple coneflowers. A delightful combination with soft, light sky blue flowers of skullcap

complimented with large pink flowers of the coneflower. Both bloom at a height of three feet or so and grow in similar woodland settings – light shade, open woodlands and average soil. Farther down the path was the early blooming elm-leaf goldenrod (*Solidago ulmifolia*). Its long, arching wands of golden yellow flowers offer another striking compliment to blue skullcap.



August marks the beginning of wonderful displays of asters and goldenrods. For shade gardens, choose the purple daisy (*Aster patens*) and lavender aster (*Aster turbinellus*), both attaining a height of 2 - 3 feet. A beautiful little goldenrod is the 2 foot tall woodland goldenrod (*Solidago petiolaris*). These brighten up the shade and provide wonderful contrast to the blue and lavender asters.

Fall is a perfect time to seek out and plant some of these woodland natives. Look in your garden for gaps – these spots are opportunities for some of the plants mentioned above. For both beginners and seasoned native plant gardeners, Shaw Nature Reserve's Whitmire Wildflower Garden has several demonstration gardens and offers classes on fall gardening (www.shawnature.org). Another source of information is GrowNative! (www.grownative.org) which has a listing of nurseries, including mail order sources, from which gardeners can buy nursery propagated plants or seeds.

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