

## Improving garden soil

There are two main methods that can be used to improve the soil's moisture retention and the overall amount of water the soil can absorb.

**Adding organic matter** to the soil (not in planting holes) improves structure by creating a better balance of spaces between soil particles. These spaces provide roots with oxygen and allow them to access soil moisture and nutrients. Used as a mulch over the soil, organic matter also helps conserve moisture; apply in spring to a depth of 5-7.5cm (2-3in).

**Improving irrigation** is most effective when introducing an irrigation system that slowly provides water directly to plants. Targeted watering using a can or a hosepipe should be carried out thoroughly and at regular intervals when the soil is dry at a depth of 2.5-5cm (1-2in). Thinning tree canopies may allow more rainwater to reach the surface below, but in times of drought (and while plants are establishing) some extra water may be required.



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### Organic matter includes:

- ❖ Well-rotted farmyard manure and home-made compost, both of which are nutrient rich.
- ❖ Leafmould, though low in nutrients, is a good soil conditioner.
- ❖ Mushroom compost is rich in nutrients but alkaline so avoid using around acid-loving ericaceous plants.

## Lifting or thinning canopy

**'Crown lifting'** is the removal of the lower branches of shrubs and trees. Starting the canopy further up the trunk will increase light levels at ground level. It can also improve the appearance of mature plants such as bays, laurels, *Viburnum* and *Ilex*.

**Thinning** tree canopies (removing individual branches) is another solution and will allow more light to reach the ground. Avoid cutting out more than 25 per cent of the canopy each year; if in doubt consult a trained tree surgeon. Once this has been achieved, improved light levels below may support shrubs such as *Nandina*, *Osmanthus*, *Fatsia japonica* and *Skimmia*, providing evergreen interest throughout the year.



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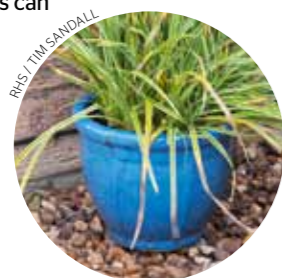


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## Using containers

Planted containers are easy to use to add colour and visual interest in areas of dry shade. Although they need watering, the plants are supported by the compost within the pot. Spread landscape fabric over the ground and cover with gravel before arranging pots into a pleasing display. Permanent plants can be chosen, while seasonal bedding pots of begonias and fuchsias can brighten the gloom.

Making raised beds below trees is not recommended; a covering of more than 7.5cm (3in) can suffocate tree roots, which need to access oxygen.



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## PROBLEM SOLVER

# Dry shade

Continuing the series of practical approaches to common garden problems

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*Areas by house walls, fences and, most challenging of all, under trees are often dry and nutrient poor. Where sunlight is limited to early morning or late evening, finding willing inhabitants can be tricky. Woody roots make digging hard and fibrous roots take up moisture intended for underplanting. However, if you choose the right plants and make adjustments to the site, these shady spots can be transformed.*

Deciduous trees offer more possibilities for underplanting than evergreens. In spring, before tree canopies expand, light and moisture allow many woodland plants to flourish, unlike beneath evergreens, where drought and heavy shade make planting more of a challenge. Yet, with adjustments, solutions are possible.



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## Alternative uses for shady areas

In some cases, dryness and dense roots may mean planting is only possible after heavy work. Consider using the area for other garden purposes:

- ❖ **A shed or storage space** could be placed here and then screened off from the rest of the garden.
- ❖ **Composting bins** would be an option, ideally positioned on top of landscape fabric or paving.
- ❖ **A shady seating area** could provide a functional solution to a shady spot.
- ❖ **Log piles** in shade can provide valuable shelter for hibernating invertebrates and other creatures.
- ❖ **A standing-out area** could be useful to protect potted and out-of-season plants from summer heat and winter frosts and rain.

## Choosing appropriate plants

Many plants have adapted to tolerate dry and shady sites. Some, such as *Bergenia*, have large leaves that make best use of low light; bristly or leathery leaves also reduce moisture losses from foliage. Herbaceous or bulbous woodland plants, such as bluebells, start growth early before tree canopies expand. Plants such as *Geranium macrorrhizum* use rhizomes to endure drought.

Consider using the following, mostly foliage plants:

- ❖ **Ferns** such as *Dryopteris filix-mas*, *Polypodium vulgare* or *Polystichum setiferum*, which tolerate dry shade once established and provide light feathery foliage.
- ❖ **Low-growing plants** that are suitable include *Bergenia*, *Campanula latifolia*, *Epimedium*, *Galium odoratum* and *Luzula*.
- ❖ **Variegated leaves** can enliven shade. Try shrubs such as *Euonymus fortunei* 'Emerald Gaiety', x *Fatsyhedera lizei* 'Variegata' and *Lonicera nitida* 'Baggesen's Gold'.
- ❖ **Climbers** such as *Hydrangea seemannii*, *Lonicera henryi*, *Pileostegia viburnoides* and *Schizophragma integrifolium* can all provide vertical interest in shady areas.



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### Ground cover

Spreading groundcover plants can be invasive but can often out-compete weeds, conserve moisture and provide interest in shady areas.

- ❖ **Plants include:** *Convallaria*, *Pulmonaria*, *Rubus tricolor*, *Symphytum*, *Vinca*, *Waldsteinia ternata*



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### Shade-tolerant shrubs

If the soil beneath deciduous trees has been improved by adding moisture-retaining organic matter, some shrubs will not only survive, but thrive.

- ❖ **Plants include:** *Griselinia littoralis*, *Hydrangea quercifolia*, *Mahonia*, *Pittosporum tenuifolium*, *Sambucus*



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### Bulbous plants

Many plants with bulbs, tubers or rhizomes survive drought by growing in spring then dying back in summer before shade gets too deep and dry.

- ❖ **Plants include:** *Anemone nemorosa*, *Corydalis solida*, *Cyclamen coum*, *Cyclamen hederifolium*, *Eranthis*

### Plant care

All plantings require regular watering at first. For successful establishment, small plants may be best. Choose herbaceous plants in 9cm (3½in) pots: a good size for planting between tree roots. Avoid pot-bound plants as their roots may continue to circle unless manually unravelled at planting time.

### FURTHER READING

- ❖ **RHS What Plant Where Encyclopedia**, 2013, RHS / Dorling Kindersley, ISBN 9781409382973, RRP £25 **RHS price £20**
- ❖ **Planting the Dry Shade Garden**, by Graham Rice, Timber Press, 2011, ISBN 9781604691870, RRP £14.99.
- ❖ **Plants for Shade: RHS simple steps to success** by Andrew Mikolajski, 2007, RHS / Dorling Kindersley, ISBN 9781405316842, (from libraries or online retailers).

[www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk) Search 'Shade planting' at the RHS website for more advice.  
❖ Find more plants suitable for dry shade at: [www.rhs.org.uk/findaplant](http://www.rhs.org.uk/findaplant)